Part V

Applications and cases II: language, politics, and (de)mobilisation
Discursive depoliticisation and political disengagement

Matthew Flinders and Matt Wood

Depoliticisation has recently emerged as an important concept for critically analysing the effect of contemporary elite discourses on declining levels of public participation in politics (Marsh & Fawcett 2014). Analysts have argued that neo-liberal discourses, in particular those surrounding globalisation, the efficiency of markets over state service provision, and the self-interested nature of public figures, have effectively led to public disengagement (Stoker 2006; Hay 2007). This is because they ‘shift the political character of decision making’ (Burnham 2001), shaping people’s preferences by making otherwise contestable policy agendas appear inevitable, natural or simple matters of ‘fate’ (Gamble 2000). If the public cannot see why engaging with politics would concretely change anything – how it would enable them to exercise their political agency (Jenkins 2011) – they will understandably disengage from voting for, and joining, political parties, institutions at the heart of liberal democratic governance. Recently, Wood and Flinders (2014) have suggested the concept of ‘discursive depoliticisation’ to highlight aspects of this process involving the linguistic or rhetorical ‘denial’ of politics. A number of questions, however, remain unanswered: how and in what particular ways do discourses ‘deny’ the political character of decision-making; which logics within these particular discourses make politics appear absent; and what is being ‘denied’ in the act of ‘denying’ politics? This chapter argues that answering these questions requires integration of the concept of discursive depoliticisation within existing frameworks of discourse analysis, which to date has not happened, despite obvious theoretical links.

The chapter does not, however, offer a review of the universe of different approaches and frameworks of discursive, linguistic or rhetorical analysis and theory (something that the other chapters in this book do in great detail). Rather, it argues that integrating the concept of discursive depoliticisation within one particular framework, namely Glynos and Howarth’s (2007) framework of discursive ‘logics’, provides a useful framework for analysts to critically explain how discursive depoliticisation shifts the political character of decision-making by denying, in particular ways, its political character. Glynos and Howarth’s framework of three logics of explanation underlying dominant forms of discourse – ‘political’, ‘social’ and ‘fantasmatic’ – is useful for our purposes because it enables critical explanation, the generation of explanations that systematically ‘provide the basis for a
possible critique and transformation of existing practices and social meanings’ (Howarth 2000, p. 129). We argue that integrating the concept of discursive depoliticisation within this framework enables this type of explanation by offering explanations of how politicians (and other elite actors) deny the possibility of collective human agency in relation to the past, present and future. Discursive depoliticisation, we argue, denies collective human agency in three ways:

1. The argument that previously dominant political paradigms were inherently ‘failed’ (denial in relation to the past);
2. The presentation of supposedly scientific social ‘rules’ that cannot be broken at a particular moment (denial in relation to the present);
3. The generation of a fantasy that change could lead to societal chaos and collapse (denial in relation to the future)

In order to briefly show the utility of this framework of critical analysis – specifically how it nuances or provides theoretical depth to the concept of ‘denial’, while recognising the increasingly contingent and interdependent reality of politics (empirical fluidity) – we use the illustrative example of austerity discourse in the United Kingdom under David Cameron’s Coalition Government. In sum, the key contribution of this chapter is conceptual innovation: integrating the concept of discursive depoliticisation within a framework of discourse theoretic analysis, thus enabling political analysts to critically explain – through a three-fold approach – how politicians discursively ‘deny’ the political character of decision-making.

The chapter proceeds in four sections. First, it argues that existing explanations of the ‘supply-side’ causes of political disengagement convalesce around the concept of depoliticisation. It is, however, argued that the deeply discursive nature of this process is not fully recognised. The second section therefore turns to existing literature that has developed the concept of ‘discursive depoliticisation’, albeit not directly to analyse political disengagement. It integrates the focus of this concept on the discursive ‘denial’ of human agency with Glynos and Howarth’s (2007) concept of ‘logics’ developing the critical typology of three ‘logics of denial’ – denial in relation to the ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’. The third section then illustrates how this conceptual integration can facilitate useful critical explanation, emphasising theoretical depth, but recognising empirical fluidity, using the UK Coalition Government’s austerity discourse as an example. The chapter then concludes by suggesting how this framework is particularly salient in a social and political world characterised by ‘hyper-democracy’, namely because it highlights the ‘radical contingency’ and volatility of contemporary forms of political disaffection.

Discursive depoliticisation and the ‘supply side’ of political disengagement

The causes of growing political disaffection and disengagement in Western democracies are manifold; therefore, in this chapter, we do not intend to offer a comprehensive review of all the different variables that impact upon it (for a recent systematic analysis see Norris 2011). Rather, we focus specifically on the discursive, rhetorical or linguistic drivers of disengagement, in particular those used by politicians, which the section argues can be encapsulated by the concept of depoliticisation (Wood & Flinders 2014). These have been termed the ‘supply side’ or ‘elite’ factors driving political disenchantment (Davies 2014; Kisby & Sloam 2011). ‘Supply-side’ factors are ‘changes in the content of the appeals that …
parties make to potential voters, changes in the character of electoral competition, changes in the substantive “goods” that politics offers to political “consumers”, and changes in the capacity of national-level governments to deliver political choice to consumers’ (Hay 2007, p. 55). Spelt out in these economistic terms, disengagement from politics is driven not by what the public demands from politicians, but what politicians can – or say they can – ‘supply’ the public with, if they get into office. Hay (2007) specifically identifies four supply-side factors that potentially impact upon disengagement. These are set out in Table 40.1.

What is first notable about these drivers is that they are all consequences of political action, rather than inexorable material structures or contextual factors. Marketisation is a process involving the growth of ideas that equate political parties with businesses, envisaging them as essentially utility-maximising, non-ideological entities competing in the marketplace of electoral competition for the votes of consumer-citizens (Scammell 2014). This is not, however, because they have naturally ‘become’ businesses, rather, because they act as if they were businesses, aiming ‘to mould the party cosmatically to appease what are perceived to be the preferences of the target voter’ (Hay 2007, p. 56). The voter, treated as a rational consumer, thus becomes disengaged in a self-fulfilling prophecy: ‘as the rational voter model predicts, rational consumers will rationally disengage’ (Hay 2007, p. 57). Some literature on political marketing has touched upon this issue (see Lilleker 2005a). Lilleker’s (2005b) work has shown that political marketing can erode the connection between parties and their base supports. Moreover, through their study of the British New Labour Government, Lilleker and Negrine (2003) show that the nationally orchestrated marketing campaign run by Tony Blair’s central party office increasingly led local voters and activists to become disengaged and disillusioned.

The second point – ‘policy convergence’ – is similarly self-fulfilling. Political parties have chosen to emphasise their ‘brand’ or ‘competence’ in place of substantive ideological preferences (Johansen 2012): ‘parties increasingly compete on the basis of more ephemeral differences in branding and on the images of trust and competence they seek to construct for themselves’ (Hay 2007, pp. 56–57, italics added). As a result, in a similar case of self-fulfilling prophecy, voters are left to make ‘assessments of party leaders’ character traits …

Table 40.1 ‘Supply-side’ causes of public disengagement with politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Key reference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Marketisation’</td>
<td>Inter-party electoral competition comes to be seen as analogous to businesses competing in the market</td>
<td>Lilleker 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Policy Convergence’</td>
<td>Political parties compete on ephemeral issues regarding the personal trust and competence of leaders, as they hold essentially similar policies</td>
<td>Manning &amp; Holmes 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Public-choice theoretic assumptions’</td>
<td>Political elites internalise ideas about the inefficiency of the public sector and the incapacity of politics to deliver public goods</td>
<td>Bøggild 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Depoliticisation’</td>
<td>The displacement of responsibility for policy-making or implementation to independent public authorities</td>
<td>Mair 2013</td>
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(Source: Adapted from Hay 2007, p. 56)
which arguably the electorate are singularly ill-placed to judge’ (Hay 2007, p. 57). The literature on the ‘personalisation’ of politics in particular supports this argument (Garzia 2011). While scholars such as Mazzoleni (2003) show how politicians may be able to connect with voters on a personal level and enthuse them through personalised narratives, a crucial caveat is that their engagement tends to be more based around the construction of emotional relationships with politicians, and disappointment and disenchantment become more likely (Manning & Holmes 2014).

Third, the growth of ‘public choice theoretic assumptions’ refers to how ‘political elites throughout the advanced liberal democracies … have come to embrace and internalize … public choice theory [which] is predicated on the projection on to politicians … of narrowly self-interested assumptions’ (Hay 2007, p. 57). Originating in the work of Anthony Downs and Kenneth Arrow, these theories assume for analytical purposes that actors are self-interested utility-maximising agents. By internalising such assumptions, we risk creating an insidious pathology that assumes all officials seeking public office have such self-interested motives, with debilitating consequences for political trust. It is Hay’s (2007) contention that elite politicians and their supervisors have done just this, and by projecting such ideas in their rhetoric and policies, they have encouraged the public to think in just that way – that they are selfish and only in it for themselves. While systematic evidence for this assertion has yet to emerge in existing literature, there has been a growing focus on the expectations the public have of their representatives, and the need to ‘manage expectations’ about their goals and aims (Flinders 2009). Bøggild (2015), for example, finds through survey experiments that politicians who are seen as self-interested in seeking re-election receive a lot less support for their policies than those who appear not to have ulterior motives. The outcome being that if politicians are not more honest with the public about their goals and aims, they risk alienating them even further.

Lastly, ‘depoliticisation’ refers (in Hay’s description here at least) to the shifting of responsibility for political decisions to non-elected quasi-public bodies, staffed by technocratic ‘experts’. ‘It is hardly surprising’, Hay (2007, p. 58) argues, ‘that in a context in which even politicians concede that “politics” is something we need rather less of, public political disaffection and disengagement is rife’. Existing research has tended not to evaluate whether the structure of governance directly impacts upon public engagement with political issues, although several studies provide strong theoretical evidence (e.g. Gamble 2000; Jenkins 2011). For Wood and Flinders (2014), depoliticisation is a multifaceted process that ought to be broken down into several forms in order to assess whether such a process is genuinely at work. However, Peter Mair’s (2013) book Ruling the void is perhaps the most sustained attempt at demonstrating this thesis. Mair (2013, ch. 3) systematically tracks the growth of expert-led agencies and decentralised governance alongside growing public disenchantment with politics, making a strong case that ‘technocratic’ governance leads to feelings of exclusion and disillusion with traditional parliamentary politics.

The above ‘supply-side’ arguments are all based on the problem of self-fulfilling prophecies – politicians have internalised negative theories of themselves, which has then influenced their behaviour but, more importantly, has also influenced the way they communicate with the electorate. By convincing themselves that they ‘hate’ politics, they in turn have convinced the public that they also ‘hate’ politics and anything deemed ‘political’, because they have internalised the negative notion of politics assumed by the political authorities. Now, this argument at first sight appears quite a heavily constructivist one. We have all come to believe, through a set of ideas translated to each other in political discourse and reinforced by the behaviour those ideas construct, that politics is a bad thing. If we could
only purge ourselves of these assumptions and construct a better image of genuinely altruistic public service, then democratic politics would have a much better future. The objection would be that this is to move towards an unwarranted idealism, which arguably lets politicians off the hook as much as it places them under scrutiny. Ultimately, the blame is pinned on the ideas themselves, politicians have just been foolish for imbibing their toxic substance.

This assessment would, however, do Hay’s analysis a disservice, because it goes further than a purely constructivist account, arguing instead that the shifting character of ‘politics’ itself, and innovative ways of exercising power, may be at hand. This is because the identification of depoliticisation as a supply-side variable seems to also hang over the other factors. Indeed, much of the remainder of Hay’s book is an analysis of depoliticisation – one of his key points of inquiry being ‘to assess the extent to which the contemporary condition of formal political disaffection and disengagement … is connected with contemporary processes of depoliticization’ (Hay 2007, p. 89). The following chapters then show how most of the supply-side factors identified above can be subsumed under the umbrella concept of depoliticisation – they all serve, in effect, to drive a process which covers up or, as Peter Burnham (2001) argued, ‘places at one remove the political character of decision making’.

The marketisation problem, policy convergence, the growth of public-choice theoretic assumptions and what Hay calls depoliticisation – but in other terms might simply be called delegated governance (Flinders 2008) – may all themselves be considered in some way forms of, or drivers of, depoliticisation. This is because they cover up or shroud the political nature of public decision-making and party competition. The argument here is that recognising this entails focusing more intently on depoliticisation as a central driving ‘supply-side’ force of political disengagement, as a key object of inquiry with regards to discerning and interrogating the causes of disengagement, and arguably just as crucially, how disengagement may be challenged. However, in order to do so, we need to recognise the distinctly discursive nature of these processes.

Discourse involves the making of speech acts and their reception by an audience of actors who subjectively interpret, internalise and relay the ideas contained in the speech act to other actors (for reviews see Schiffrin 1994; Howarth 2000). When actors – say, politicians – make speeches in which they proclaim policies to be beyond the realms of their control, and therefore not subject to ‘politics’ of any meaningful sort, then the ‘political nature’ of those policies does not automatically get shifted away into the ether. Rather, it attempts such a shift, which may or may not be accepted by the ‘audience’. That in turn may mean that the audience is less likely to recognise in future that the policy in question actually is political, and to act upon that acknowledgement by engaging substantively in raising the issue as a political problem in a public forum. Of course, the opposite may be equally as likely – the audience may reject the assertion that the policy in case is non-political, and instead re-engage with the issue, perhaps even more virulently than previously. We shall return to this argument presently. For now though, it is critical to emphasise that, from the perspective of political disengagement, the supply-side argument is one concerned properly with depoliticisation as a discursive process. In order to critically assess the supply-side drivers of political disengagement, we require a framework for unearthing and exposing the different aspects of discourses that make them depoliticising, and facilitating an analytical approach that enables criticism of when elites (or indeed, any actors) attempt to use such tools. The following section argues that integrating the concept of discursive depoliticisation within a framework of logics of critical explanation enables us to do precisely this.
Discursive depoliticisation: conceptualising ‘denial’

The concept of discursive depoliticisation has been posited by Wood and Flinders (2014) as a distinct form of depoliticisation, separate from what they term ‘governmental depoliticisation’ (the extent of government control over arm’s-length bodies) and ‘societal depoliticisation’ (policy issues are simply left off the agenda). Discursive depoliticisation ‘focuses on the role of language and ideas to depoliticise certain issues and through this define them as little more (than) elements of fate’ (Wood & Flinders 2014, p. 165). It is essentially this process that analysts of the ‘supply side’ of political disengagement are concerned with – to identify and interrogate how particular elite discourses shift the political nature of decisions. Explicit conceptualisations of discursive depoliticisation have been developed by Jenkins (2011) and Wood (2015) (for an empirical application see Bates et al. 2014). Jenkins (2011) develops a conception of ‘the political’ as relating broadly to contingency and human agency (for theoretical specification of this concept of the political see Gamble 2000), defining depoliticisation as explicit social strategies of recognising or denying the presence of human agency in social situations. She hence stipulates a broad definition of depoliticisation: ‘A strategy of depoliticisation entails forming necessities, permanence, immobility, closure and fatalism and concealing/negating or removing contingency’ (Jenkins 2011, p. 160).

From this broad definition, Wood (2015) defines discursive depoliticisation more specifically as the ‘denial by humans of their capacity to alter their collective practices, institutions and social conditions’. This is distinguished from discursive politicisation, which includes discursive practices that recognise human capacities to alter their collective practices, institutions and social conditions. Second, it is distinguished from ‘social learning processes’, which involve neither recognition, nor denial, but merely silence on altering collective practices, institutions and social conditions, instead focusing on tweaking or ‘nudging’ individual behaviours in order to achieve policy goals. Depoliticisation includes discourses that actively deny or ‘push back’ against the capacity to collectively change common practices, institutions and social conditions.

To date, this conceptual debate has moved the literature towards more specific definitions. However, the notion of discursive ‘denial’ has yet to be unpacked conceptually or empirically. What constitutes a ‘denial’ and how is politics ‘denied’, linguistically? Despite ‘denial’ being arguably a critical concern in the study of political language and discourse, it is difficult to find a sustained treatment of the concept of depoliticisation within this literature. Often, we find emphasis on ‘sedimentation’ (Jessop 2010), or other concepts that essentially describe how ‘identities and their nodal points obtain fixity’ (Carpentier & De Cleen 2007, p. 266; see also Moon 2013, p. 117), with fixity clearly relating to the denial that alternative ideas or collective action is possible or desirable. The wider literature on language, communication, rhetoric, argumentation and performance addresses denial, but does not link it to depoliticisation. Teun van Dijk (1992) sets out a schema of different forms of denial in the case of racial discrimination:

1 ‘Act denial’ (‘I did not do/say that at all’);
2 ‘Control denial’ (‘I did not do/say that on purpose’, ‘It was an accident’);
3 ‘Intention denial’ (‘I did not mean that’, ‘You got me wrong’);
4 ‘Goal denial’ (‘I did not do/say that, in order to…’).

(van Dijk 1992, p. 92)
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This framework can be applied at individual, institutional and societal scales, either referring to counter-attack against accusations, or pre-emptory denial of responsibility or blame for negative outcomes. At an individual or personal level, Mitchell et al. (2011) examine personal denial strategies for not challenging racist statements in everyday conversations, identifying internal personal justifications of not being able to overcome broad structures of discrimination. At an institutional level, Hansson (2015) applies this analysis to public administration, drawing on Christopher Hood’s concept of ‘blame games’ to show how, among other rhetorical strategies, politicians and civil servants practice forms of ‘denial’ to shift responsibility for policy problems. He identifies forms of ‘total problem denial, partial problem denial, and problem denial accompanied by a counter-attack’ in which policy-makers attempt to ‘win an argument over culpability in its own terms by offering persuasive excuses and justifications’ (Hansson 2015, p. 305). Moreover, at a macro-societal scale, Wodak and de Cillia (2007) show how denial works as a way of displacing collective political/psychological traumas, using the example of post-1945 Austria, in which public discourse constructed the country as a ‘newly born child’ and the country’s complicity with the Third Reich as a ‘dark’ period not to be discussed.

Our concern in this chapter is to link denial strategies to depoliticisation – or rather, linking strategies of denial similar to those outlined above with the higher-level aim of ‘placing at one remove the political nature of decision making’ – not merely ‘denying’ responsibility or blame, but the very political nature of those decisions to begin with. Here, we argue that a fruitful engagement can be made with Jason Glynos and David Howarth’s (2007) framework for critical explanation through the concept of ‘logics’. Glynos and Howarth’s ‘discourse theoretic approach’ (further expanded in Glynos 2001; Howarth 2010), can be applied in critically explaining how discursive depoliticisation works, that is, how politicians (in our case) ‘deny’ discursively the capacity for altering collective practices, institutions and social conditions through different ‘logics’. The reason we turn to Howarth and Glynos’ approach is because of its critical focus on the deeper meanings (logics) underlying discourse, rather than merely their linguistic construction. We are interested in promoting a framework for critically explaining how discursive depoliticisation works, rather than simply determining whether it exists and has causal efficacy or not (for causal evidence see Hay 2007; Stoker, 2006). As Howarth (2000) usefully puts it, ‘discourse theory seeks to provide novel interpretations of events and practices by elucidating their meaning’, rather than being concerned with ‘causal’ explanation as such.

Other frameworks of discourse analysis could also be integrated. Notably, the various approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (for a review see Hart & Cap 2014) are similar, being concerned ‘to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use (or in discourse)’ (Wodak 2004, p. 187). Fairclough’s (1992) *Discourse and social change* offers arguably the closest contender, integrating, as it does, micro- and macro-levels of ‘how a discursive event stands in relation to hegemonies’ (p. 10). However, Glynos and Howarth’s approach can be distinguished from CDA approaches due to their ‘different methodologies, with detailed linguistic analysis of actual instances of discourse by CDA … juxtaposed to a more general analysis of the discursive articulation of political identities’ (Carpentier & De Cleen 2007, p. 278). For our purposes, the ‘discourse theory approach’ ‘allows one to historicize, scrutinize, and de-naturalize the seemingly fixed interests and identities assigned to subjects’ (Paul 2009, p. 243), as expressed in the central concern with logics ‘understood in a very specific way, as capturing the point, rules and ontological preconditions of a practice or regime of practices’ (Glynos & Howarth 2008, p. 165). The ‘deeper’ meanings underlying discourse
are uncovered and critically analysed, as opposed to their strategic, socio-political construction, which is the concern of CDA.

What, then, is this approach and how can it be integrated into the analysis of discursive depoliticisation? Put briefly, due to space constraints, Glynos and Howarth’s framework develops an eclectic set of insights from post-structuralist socio-political theory into a typology of three logics of critical explanation: social logics, political logics and fantasmatic logics. As Howarth argues, with a logics framework ‘the function’ of power ‘is to conceal the radical contingency of social relations and to naturalize relations of domination’ (Howarth 2010, p. 310). This is similar to the definition of discursive depoliticisation as discursive denial, the shielding, obfuscating or veiling of the capacity of humans to collectively alter their common institutions, practices and social conditions. ‘Social logics’, they argue, ‘enable us to characterize practices in a particular social domain’ (p. 133). A particular discourse has a logically stated set of rules and ‘laws’ that support its dominance at any one particular time, and uncovering social logics enables analysts to highlight the contingent aspects of these ‘laws’. Second, ‘political logics’ ‘provide the means to explore how social practices are instituted, contested and defended’ (2007 p. 133). When analysing a political logic, the analyst ‘disclos(es) and render(s) visible the contingent character of any practice, policy or institution by showing the role of power and exclusion in its formation’. Analysing political logics involves analysing the past, analysing a logic that justifies the dominance of a set of ideas by rationalising the previous political struggles that it has survived in order to become dominant. Lastly, ‘fantasmatic logics’ or ‘logics of fantasy’ aim ‘to capture a particularly powerful way in which subjects are rendered complicit in concealing or covering over the radical contingency of social relations’ (Glynos & Howarth 2007, p. 134; see Glynos 2008). A logic of fantasy includes ‘the different types of “enjoyment” subjects procure in identifying with discourses and believing things they do’ (Howarth 2010, p. 326), or in other words, underlying or overt narratives that dramatise the world, in the manner of a film, abstracting what it could, in theory, become. Often, then, analysing logics of fantasy involves analysing how discourse conceives the future.

These logics are clearly overlapping and interconnected. Any appeal to a particular rule or law (social logic), will often rely upon historical evidence about how it has proved superior to other ideas (political logic) and (usually implicit) appeal to a fantasy of what might be achieved were the rule to be followed, or what catastrophe might ensue were the rule to be violated (logic of fantasy). Analytically, however, Glynos and Howarth (2007) argue that examining the domination of a particular discourse by interrogating these three logics ‘has a role to play in furnishing us with a complete explanatory account’. Accounting systematically for how a discourse dominates within a particular context requires an analysis of how it dominates discourse about how society has come to be (the political logic), how it is currently (social logic) and how it should or could be in the future (logic of fantasy). Table 40.2 therefore applies this framework of logics to the analysis of discursive depoliticisation.

The logics of denial are not exhaustive, but they do provide the most encompassing framework available, drawing from a comprehensive approach to analysing ‘logics’. The three ‘logics of denial’ – teleological assertions, restatements of assumed rules or laws, and evoking disastrous fictions – construct a multidimensional picture of how discursive depoliticisation works. The following section shows how this framework can be used to analyse the critical case study of the depoliticisation of austerity policies during the post-global financial crisis era in UK politics.

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Discursive depoliticisation

Table 40.2 Typology of different logics of discursive depoliticisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator of discursive depoliticisation</th>
<th>Denial in relation to…</th>
<th>Empirical trope of denial</th>
<th>Example – Coalition Austerity Discourse in the UK</th>
<th>Explanatory logic (Glynos &amp; Howarth 2007)</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>The past</td>
<td>‘Things were worse in the old days’</td>
<td>The sick man of Europe in the 1970s</td>
<td>‘Political’</td>
<td>Refuting genealogical arguments stating things ‘could be otherwise’</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Capital-flight thesis</td>
<td>‘Social’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The present</td>
<td>‘This rule holds in all circumstances’</td>
<td>‘Social’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The future</td>
<td>‘If things change, disaster will ensue’</td>
<td>‘Fantasy’</td>
<td>Attempting to captivate audience through the politics of fear</td>
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Theoretically deep, empirically fluid: Analysing austerity discourse through discursive depoliticisation

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, and in particular since the European Union sovereign debt crisis – which resulted in several governments, including Greece, Ireland and Portugal, seeking assistance from the International Monetary Fund – governments across Europe have sought to impose austerity policies. These include reductions in central-government funding for welfare benefits, education, health-service provision and other public services instead of tax increases. A number of analysts have argued that the imposition of austerity has been ‘depoliticising’, further entrenching neo-liberalism as an ideological paradigm and stifling political opposition (Kerr et al. 2011; Macartney 2011; Paudyn 2013; Radice 2014; Macartney 2014). Despite the growth of depoliticising discourse, however, empirical evidence shows that political opposition and participation is greater than would be expected. This section argues that the discursive depoliticisation framework is able to deal with this apparent paradox by generating theoretically deep nuanced analysis of the logics behind particular acts of depoliticisation, while allowing for the increasingly dynamic, contingent or fluid causal relationships between depoliticisation and political disengagement. It illustrates this through a brief analysis of depoliticising discourses employed in the case of the UK, analysing George Osborne and David Cameron’s political speeches, and identifies each ‘logic of denial’ within this selection.

The first is a logic of denial in relation to the past, made up of ‘The dank, “declinist” colloquialisms (“cap-in-hand”, “sick man of Europe”, “winter of discontent”, “break-up of Britain”) piled up like uncollected rubbish’ (Black 2012, p. 175). These references to Britain in the 1970s as an economically backward ‘third-world’ country before the advent of Thatcherism in the 1980s continue to provide justificatory symbols for how any change of
course from neo-liberal economic policies is unthinkable. As George Osborne argued in a 2012 speech to the Conservative Party conference:

Yes we’ve cut the budget deficit by a quarter. But it tells you something about just how big it was that the deficit is still higher today than when a British government went begging to the IMF in the 1970s. This Wednesday I’m also going to a meeting of the IMF. Don’t worry. Because of the resolve of the British people, I go representing a country that is seen as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

(Osborne 2012)

David Cameron’s 2013 speech to the party conference made a similar argument:

With its brains and research centres, let’s make Manchester the world leader in advanced materials. We’re building an economy for the North and South, embracing new technologies, producing things and selling them to the world. So make no mistake who’s looking forward in British politics … we’ll leave the 1970s-style socialism to others … we are the party of the future.

(Cameron 2013)

Here, Cameron is appealing to the image of the ‘bad old days’ of the 1970s, and how reverting to similar policies or practices as then is simply unthinkable. The 1970s was ‘the problem’ and Cameron’s Government, is, apparently, part of ‘the solution’. Collective human agency is denied in this instance because of the juxtaposition of the past as purely ‘bad’ and the present as purely ‘good’, such that any ‘return’ is old-fashioned and outdated. Looking ‘forward’, in Cameron’s words, hence means forgetting alternatives and continuing on an unquestionably ‘righteous’ path.

The second logic of denial is the appeal to the rule that increased taxation and regulation of business leads to capital flight. The logic here assumes, in line with ‘business-school’ globalisation theory, that increasing rates of taxation leads to capital flight and disinvestment. While such assumptions have received much empirical refutation, they nonetheless retain significant weight discursively. Since 2010, the UK’s Coalition Government employed such logics to further justify austerity. A speech by David Cameron to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) demonstrates this well:

Corporation tax – coming down to the lowest rate in the G7 and yes, the top rate of tax has been cut too because you cannot on the one hand say ‘Britain’s open for business’ and on the other have the highest top rate of tax in the G20. So this is what being tough means. Doing what’s right for our future; taking on all the noisy lobby groups that want to pour money into today and forget about tomorrow. And this approach is working. The deficit cut by 25 per cent. Interest rates at record lows. A million new private sector jobs created in two years. Exports up dramatically. That’s what tough government has helped deliver

(Cameron 2012)

Cameron emphasised this point again at length at the 2013 party conference:

To get decent jobs for people, you’ve got to recognise some fundamental economic facts. We are in a global race today. No one owes us a living. Last week, our ambition
to compete in the global race was airily dismissed as a race to the bottom ... that it means competing with China on sweatshops and India on low wages. No – those countries are becoming our customers ... and we’ve got to compete with California on innovation; Germany on high-end manufacturing; Asia on finance and technology. And here’s something else you need to recognise about this race. The plain fact is this. All those global companies that employ lots of people – they can set up anywhere in the world. They could go to Silicon Valley. To Berlin. And yes, here in Manchester. And these companies base their decisions on some simple things: like the tax rates in each country. So if those taxes are higher here than elsewhere, they don’t come here. And if they don’t come here, we don’t get those jobs.

(Cameron 2013)

Here, the desirability of Britain to international investors and high taxation rates are presented as directly, and logically, contradictory. The theory is simply assumed as fact, and any alternative to this is skirted over. ‘Tough government’ is thus, apparently, needed to enforce this ‘rule’ in order to achieve specified outcomes (creation of jobs, low interest rates, deficit reduction) – tough government meaning, in this case, austere government.

Finally, the logic of denial in relation to the future can be found in comparisons with political conflict elsewhere, and the claim that any diversion away from austerity policies will lead to such political collapse. In the case of Britain, the comparison is often Greece, where large-scale political disruption, widespread unemployment and declining gross domestic product have been prevalent, particularly since the Eurozone crisis began in 2011. George Osborne again provides us with a prime example, this time in a speech responding to Ed Miliband (then British Labour Party Leader), who provoked debate about a ‘cost of living crisis’, and a potential alternative to austerity:

More borrowing and more debt remains their economic policy. But they no longer dare talk to the British people about it. Instead, they’d much rather just talk about the cost of living. As if the cost of living was somehow detached from the performance of the economy. Well you ask the citizens of Greece what happens to living standards when the economy fails. You ask someone with a mortgage what happens to their living standards when mortgage rates go up. Just a 1% rise means an extra £1,000 on the average mortgage bill. You ask the citizens of this country what would be an absolute disaster for living standards. They’ll tell you. Higher borrowing. Higher welfare costs. Higher taxes. Meaning: higher mortgage rates. And higher unemployment.

(Osborne 2013)

David Cameron made a similar statement days later:

I see that Labour have stopped talking about the debt crisis and now they talk about the cost of living crisis. As if one wasn’t directly related to the other. If you want to know what happens if you don’t deal with a debt crisis ... and how it affects the cost of living ... just go and ask the Greeks. So finishing the job means sticking to our course until we’ve paid off all of Labour’s deficit, not just some of it.

(Cameron 2013)

Here, the case of Greece is evoked in a spectral manner as a worst-case scenario, and is then linked to the danger of an ‘absolute disaster’ for ‘citizens of this country’, were the
government to change course and introduce higher taxes. Because changing course would lead to a Greek-style socio-economic collapse, and at least an extra £1,000 on any mortgage bill, austerity must remain. Collective human agency is enclosed by appealing to a ‘fantasy’ of economic collapse, thereby evoking fear and insecurity.

The critical analysis of the quotations from Cameron and Osborne provides only a small taster of what a full critical analysis of austerity discourse in Britain – using our discursive depoliticisation framework – would look like. What is important about the brief analysis is that we do not assume any necessary relationship between the logics of denial and their effects. We do not assume that the logics are necessarily convincing or effective in achieving their intended aims (whatever those may be), nor do we assume they are uncontested or even necessarily dominant at any one particular time (the third quote from George Osborne in response to an arguably more powerful alternative speech by Ed Miliband is indicative of this). There is an assumption of empirical fluidity. But critical discourse theory, as Howarth explains, ‘does not simply attempt to retrieve and reconstruct the meanings of social actors … nor, on the other hand, does it seek to uncover the true underlying meanings of texts and actions’. Rather, it seeks to ‘provide novel interpretations of events and practices … so that they may acquire a different significance and provide the basis for possible critique and transformation of existing practices and social meanings’ (Howarth 2000, p. 129). This different significance or theoretical depth comes from drawing out these three logics and thus emphasising the multiple ways in which the Coalition Government’s austerity discourse attempts to construct particular meanings that seek to close down or delimit people’s understandings of the choices that are available in liberal democratic societies. These are worthy of critical analysis in themselves – as worthy as it would be highlighting in a conversation in a pub or a seminar room that an argument or set of assumptions degrades or belittles politics as a worthwhile and important activity of deciding for ourselves how we should be governed.

Conclusion: communication and the politics of hyper-democracy

In this chapter, we have argued for integrating the salient concept of depoliticisation with a well-established ‘logics of critical analysis’ model developed by Glynos and Howarth (2007) in order to address the ‘supply side’ of political disengagement. We posited three ‘logics of denial’ underlying depoliticising discourse – denial in relation to the past, present and future. Critically assessing these, we suggested, is important for the purposes of calling out attempts at shaping negatively the public’s attitudes towards politics. Importantly, conceived in this way, depoliticisation may lead to political disengagement, as argued in Hay’s Why we hate politics, or it may even, perversely, lead to greater disengagement based on a distorted and vicious conception of the public interest. What is critical though, in relation to our framework, is that it offers theoretical depth to the critical analysis of ‘denial’ and its different forms, but makes room for empirical fluidity, in a way that a more rigid approach focused purely on causal relationships, or an approach assuming a priori that depoliticisation is uncontested, would not.

It is with this thought in mind that we conclude this chapter, not by setting out a future ‘research agenda’ (we believe that this appears obvious enough from the three-fold framework we have presented), but rather to point to why we believe that our framework – specifically Glynos and Howarth’s (2007) ‘post-structuralist’ insights – can be salient at this moment. Glynos and Howarth’s framework is particularly important, not merely because it provides an accessible three-fold distillation of the systematic – but often impenetrable –
post-structuralist approaches to political discourse found in political theory (of which we are not experts ourselves), but rather because it is arguably especially applicable in a time when political structures are becoming more ‘liquid’ (Bauman 2000) and political authority is increasingly being scrutinised and contested (Hajer 2009). Put simply, we arguably live in an era of what Welch (2013) calls ‘hyper-democracy’. In essence, hyper-democracy, as Welch (2013, p. 2) defines it, refers ‘neither [to] “more democracy” nor “an excess of democracy”’ but ‘the intensification of democracy’. If (liberal) democracy refers to a system of rule wherein authorities are responsive and accountable to public demand, then ‘hyper-democracy’ refers to a system whereby the political pressures required to make that system work – or as David Easton (1957) seminally called them, ‘inputs’ – intensify, putting the system itself under strain.

In this system, politicians try to depoliticise their decisions by portraying them as inevitable or necessary. And yet, as Gamble (2015, p. 42) argues, while structural hierarchies still exist, within those hierarchies, ‘governments still face myriad demands for increased spending … [and] strong external pressures to take control of their public finances’. The implications of this for analysts of political discourse is that the frameworks they use should be open and inclusive of the ‘indeterminacy’ of contemporary society, and while still ‘speaking truth to power’, analysts ought to be aware of the increasingly unstable and uncertain conditions within which power operates, and within which they analyse power. This chapter has aimed to provide a framework for critically analysing depoliticising discourse in such a way – critical of its consequences for politics, but recognising its contingent and indeterminate operation.

Notes

1 These aspects of ‘formal’ politics are clearly not all there is to political participation. ‘Alternative’ forms of participation in the form of activism in social movements, local participation and ‘everyday making’ are arguably on the rise (Li & Marsh 2008). For our purposes here, though, the causes of disengagement from ‘formal politics’ – parties, parliaments and electoral procedures – are taken as a key research question, setting aside questions of how ‘participation’ can or should be defined.

2 Critically addressing ‘powerful elites’ is important to any approach for analysing the ‘supply side’ drivers of political disengagement. It could be argued that such an approach tends to privilege a focus on the specific actions of politicians (their ‘agency’) at the expense of a focus on broader structures driving disengagement (class-based disengagement, for example). This raises interesting questions about who ought to be ‘held accountable’ for political disengagement, which we cannot address here. We would agree with Corbett (2015), however, who calls for more research on the internal practices of politicians themselves to assess the extent to which their ‘supply side’ practices are driven more by structural pressures, or are due to an internalized culture.

3 Note that these logics refer both to the logics used by researchers in their explanation and to the logics used by the political actors they are studying in the discourses they adopt. In discourse theoretic analysis, the line between the researcher and the world they are studying is self-consciously blurred or problematised, so as to move beyond overtly positivist approaches to research.

References


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