<CH>Concluding remarks: Towards Legitimisation Studies in contemporary crises

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<A>1 Introduction

The study of discourse cannot avoid the analysis of discourse production and discourse reception. This volume has sought to explore the gap between public expectations and political commitment. Contexts of crisis reveal certain significant features of political discourse. Legitimisation shows that despite attempts to bridge the gap between expectations and delivery, legitimisation strategies have certain limits. Further research is needed to show why these tools have varying degrees of success. In this final discussion, cases where these strategies may expose their limits will be examined. Can discursive strategies be enhanced or improved to make legitimisation strategies more effective for political actors and thereby reduce the gap between expectation and performance? In times of crisis, it becomes even more important for political actors to appear to be legitimate while relying on discourse to support their positions and actions.

<A>2 Legitimisation through didactic discourse

In times of crisis, politicians are required to communicate efficiently in order to guide the public. In particular, they need to enforce specific measures aimed at controlling the crisis and avoid a runaway stage where the crisis cannot be controlled anymore.[1] For these measures to be effective, they need to be implemented collectively, at the national or international level. The combined impact of political measures can also involve enforcement and authority. In such cases, political authority can be perceived as a legitimate process through which the politicians make use of their legislative power to reach a prospective stage of public safety. This process is best illustrated by the measures taken against the COVID-19 health crisis during which politicians across the world enforced national lockdowns, mask-wearing measures, and social-distancing measures to protect the population.

Yet, as widely reported in the existing literature, the reliance on political authority was heavily criticised and mocked by the public and the media (Hanne 2022; Musolff 2022). There was also a significant spread of conspiracy theories which assigned mischievous or problematic characteristics to governments and likened politicians to dictators or gurus (Jolley and Paterson 2020; Bierwiaczonek et al. 2022).

[1] See the discussion of 'runaway' climate crisis in van der Hel et al. (2018).

As a result, there may be a perception held by the media and the public in which legitimate policies are seen as illegitimate. This perception may reside in the collective enforcement of such policies, which can eventually undermine individual circumstances. It may also reside in the flaws of political discourse which aim to legitimise political authority over the public. For instance, a large body of research has demonstrated the questionable use of WAR-like imageries in existing political discourse about COVID-19. To illustrate this point: 'The fight to slow the spread of COVID-19 is "our big war," [US President] Trump said Thursday. "It's a medical war. We have to win this war. It's very important".' (*Time*, 19 March 2020, quoted after Musolff (2022: 77)). The significant exploitation of this kind of imagery in political and public discourse (Charteris-Black 2021; Olza et al. 2021) has ultimately shed light on the controversial connotations involved in the conceptualisation of COVID-19 AS WAR. Accordingly, sick individuals have been perceived as PUBLIC ENEMIES and health workers as FIGHTERS bearing the brunt of the management of the pandemic (Semino 2020).

It has been argued that political discourse which addresses crisis may promote legitimacy by adopting didactic strategies (Augé 2022a, 2023: 164-79). Since legitimisation also involves the public reception of political discourse, it is all the more necessary for politicians to adapt their discourse to the particularity of the audience, for example: the different ages of recipients, experiences, cultures, knowledge, genres, professions, and ethnicities, among many other factors (cf. Charteris-Black 2011, 2014, 2021). Their discourse must also adapt to the specific nature of the socio-political context in which the discourse is taking place – the context of crisis.

Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis still represent abstract concepts: these crises are related to an 'invisible' virus (Augé 2022a) and long-term, uneven climatic phenomena (van der Hel et al. 2018). This means that the risks associated with crises need to be thoroughly explained and in concrete terms to the public so that collective enforcement of safety measures like mask-wearing or sustainable behaviour are perceived as legitimate by the recipients.

Climate crisis discourse represents a pertinent illustration of didactic discourse about crisis. The significant reliance on 'pedagogical' metaphorical expressions has already been investigated (Boyd 1993), including the metaphors of the 'carbon footprint' (Nerlich and Hellsten 2014), the 'tipping point' (van der Hel et al. 2018), and the 'greenhouse effect' (Augé 2022b; Chapter 9) in discourse aiming at explaining to recipients the urgency to tackle the crisis. By conceptually mapping a concrete source domain with a complex target domain associated with public fear and misunderstanding, discourse producers (notably scientists and activists) have promoted a didactic depiction of the crisis scenario with the use of familiar terms which can appeal to the public.

This type of didactic discourse is yet to be adopted by politicians who, instead, have been reported to favour highly conventional metaphorical expressions (Ly 2013) such as the JOURNEY-PATH-MOVEMENT metaphor, as in 'Now is the time to … set off on a journey to a cleaner, greener future'

(Boris Johnson, 26th Conference of the Parties, 2021; quoted after Augé (2023: 65)). The reliance on didactic discursive strategies, as applied, for example, to activists' discourse (Rapport 1995; Ross et al. 1997) has been shown to have an impact on recipients' reasoning about the crisis (Nay and Brunson 2013; Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011, 2013).

Consequently, the didactic discourse about crisis situations forms a significant dimension of political legitimisation. The numerous contestations related to political illegitimacy in the context of crisis could possibly be explained by the focus on political authority and collectivism, while didactic political discursive strategies have yet to be documented.

<A>3 The impact of new forms of media

The opportunity to address public comments and questions in political discourse and decision-making could form the first step towards more didactic discursive strategies to be adopted by politicians. Significantly, the political exchanges with citizens which are facilitated by the new media present significant discursive patterns. The development of new media formats in recent years is the result of technological progress in the digital domain. These formats include video platforms like YouTube and Twitch and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The rise of social media has enabled the public to share information, opinions and experiences (Roxburgh et al. 2019). Although these different websites may appeal to different audiences for different reasons, they all share the facility for disseminating news, documents or ideas quickly. This brings into question to what extent new media, understood in terms of their formats, should be analysed as the new media and as part of a journalistic enterprise. In contexts of crisis and conflict, this technological phenomenon gives rise to a number of observations and challenges for future research in respect of discourse legitimisation through the new media.

Firstly, new media formats are not incompatible with the dissemination of legitimised discourse through moral evaluation, where the message may not only be superficial, but also transmissible in different contexts through the accessible nature of simplified notions. Although transferable, these simplifications of reality have far-reaching and complex political ramifications. One study analyses the spread of misinformation on the online social media platform Twitter with respect to the alleged health benefits of nicotine in the face of COVID-19 (Silver et al. 2022). The authors draw on observations made by Papacharissi (2015): the democratisation of journalism means that the publishing of purposeful public discourse finds itself cohabiting with misinformation and comments made incoherently or in bad faith (Silver et al. 2022). The cohabitation of misleading and accurate public information can be seen through the ease with which detailed and accurate news reports can be redistributed online in the form of short, punctual information which can reach out to a large

audience with minimal effort. The size of an audience may depend on the composition of the social group and whether the issue transcends international boundaries. For example, Froio and Ganesh (2019) conduct a study of far-right movements and political groups on Twitter in a transnational context and conclude that the retweeting of messages between members in different countries depends on the subject at stake, with the economy and immigration being retweeted the most at the transnational level.

Secondly, the relative ease with which a news item can be redistributed leads to another challenge for the legitimisation of political discourse, and discourse in general. The emphasis on dissemination and the reaching out by new sources of information can lead to misleading interpretations of expert sources of authority. There is some evidence that the transmission of information and ideas is organised differently between Twitter and YouTube, according to a study by Park et al. (2015) into the social networks of the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement. In this study, networks on Twitter were found to be organised around a hierarchical structure with a relatively small number of powerful users involved in republishing information, while YouTube was more conducive to the sharing of ideas, interconnection and solidarity between users (Park et al. 2015). The question of expertise is not only an issue for online social media platforms, but also for the mainstream terrestrial television channels. The problem is illustrated by the rise in the United Kingdom of the 'presentician', whose status lies ambiguously between news presenter or journalist, and political campaigner or politician (Boulton 2023). This may lead to scenarios in which political and social actors self-legitimise their discourse with the help of their own expertise, or become recognised as experts because of their ability to disseminate information.

Finally, the new media may have a polarising effect on public opinion (Sun et al. 2023). The risk is greater where the subjects to which participants are exposed are more diverse (Lee et al. 2014: 706). Conflicts are therefore at risk of being exacerbated rather than leading to discourse smoothing processes. Questions remain, for example, over the use of the expression 'nuclear card'[2] or 'nuclear cards'[3] with respect to the options allegedly open to the leader of Russia at the time of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As demonstrated by Tomoshige (Chapter 8), the CARD metaphor is extendable to new contexts. Its implications have the potential to go well beyond the level of interaction between individuals. In some of the replies given at a press conference given by Hua Chunying, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs in China, on 4th August 2022, Chunying claims that 'The US has sought to play the "Taiwan card" to contain China' in order to de-legitimise the US's position in relation to

[2] Jake Sullivan (White House national security advisor), interviewed by CBS, is quoted as saying: 'US says it told the Kremlin that Russia will face "catastrophic consequences" if it uses tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine.' Quoted by Epstein and Haltiwanger (2022).

[3] The expression is used by John R. Bolton, a former national security adviser in the United States of America (Bolton 2023).

China. However, the Assistant Minister appears to legitimise any response by China by stating that 'We will not sit by and watch the US play the "Taiwan card" to serve the US's domestic politics and the selfish interests of some politicians'.[4] More research is needed into the transmission of such short but powerful evaluative messages and how these messages can be transmitted widely and quickly, but at what cost to the legitimisation of a political position and to the resolution of a crisis situation.

<A>4 The impact on the public: Over-legitimisation?

As discussed in the above section, the new media form part of a particular context of discourse where political legitimisation is brought into question. Political discourse is spread and exploited not only by journalists who can be perceived as professional communicators, but also by political opponents and the public. These media represent a platform for displaying various opinions and arguments about political decisions and scandals (Edwards 2013). As a result, political legitimacy can be tested through the exploitation of political discourse in the new media.

The challenge to political legitimacy is particularly relevant in cases where the political discourse has already been established as legitimate, for example: following scientific experiments and findings or contextual evidence. In contexts of crisis, the recurrence of political quotes across diverse media can ultimately generate overwhelming fear among the public, which in turn can prevent effective measures from being implemented. The need to surrender to political authority and possible feelings of powerlessness due to the impact of the crisis may cause resignation from within the public (Augé 2023: 62-103). This negative impact of legitimisation in times of crisis can be illustrated in the case of the climate crisis, where environmental activists have been criticised for relying on 'alarmism' (Risbey 2008; Küppers 2022) for example, by depicting the climate crisis as a 'time bomb' (Doyle 2007). While such an 'alarmist' stance could be required in order to inform the public about the risk of environmental inaction, the global relevance of the topic and the ease with which the discourse can be accessed and exploited may ultimately favour a predominant impression of fear. The 'retweet' and 'quoted tweet' options available on the social media platform Twitter may be significant tools giving rise to predominant emotions experienced by the public. In the context of the climate crisis, the emotion of fear is best encapsulated by the notion of 'ecoanxiety' (Hickman 2020; Coffey et al. 2021) through which recipients are surrounded by various pieces of information regarding a wide range of safety measures. These measures are all perceived as being legitimate, to the extent that individual actions taken in order to control the crisis become an obsession preventing recipients from imagining a life in a society free of crisis. The example of 'ecoanxiety' thus represents a case where legitimate

[4] The expression is used by Hua Chunying (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 2022).

discourse has been misused because it did not take into account the specific features and popularity of the new media. This example also shows that discourse can be established as legitimate and subsequently be perceived as illegitimate following the public (mis)use of the new media (Abrams et al. 2021).

This process will tentatively be referred to as cases of over-legitimisation, whereby access to mainly online information significantly impacts the legitimisation strategies adopted by politicians. This impact is not only due to the documented spread of 'rumors' and 'fake news' brought about by the new media (Naeem et al. 2020; Apuke and Omar 2021; Gür-Şeker et al. 2022), but also the particularities of the context of crisis which is characterised by political authority, public fear, and collectivism. Therefore, extended access to crisis discourse may prevent adequate practices as authorised in such discourse, and can result in providing grounds for de-legitimisation.

If the significant use of the new media by the public is considered, the above observation leads to the hypothesis that political debates and oppositions, as well as humorous or sarcastic 'deconstructions' (Musolff 2022) of political discourse in times of crisis, might actually serve to reinforce legitimisation strategies. While didactic discourse helps politicians to communicate the risks and legitimise associated policies, the discourse of the new media represents a platform where individuals' arguments and emotions regarding these policies can be easily expressed, debated or deconstructed. However, the importance of gatekeeping on the discourse produced in the new media must be considered (Liu et al. 2021). As such, the producers of discourse in the new media may not resort to legitimisation strategies in the same way that political discourse requires legitimisation. Legitimisation in discourses of crisis produced in the new media may be excessively exploited to the extent that the public reception overly adapts to such discourse, which might result in generalised fear and resignation.

The dialogue permitted by the new media between individuals (primarily politicians and the public) is a significant asset in the arsenal of legitimisation strategies and still requires thorough analysis by linguists and political scientists. By sharing personal or local experiences of the crisis, questioning the scopes of particular policies and expressing emotions generated by crisis discourse, discourse producers can legitimise their stances, specifically through didactic discursive strategies. These strategies can help to limit the adverse impacts on political authority and manage the public's fear, both of which characterise legitimate political discourse on matters of crisis.

<A>5 Conclusion

The exploration of Legitimisation Studies points to the need for Critical Discourse Studies to reappraise how political actors justify their actions in contexts where threat, uncertainty and urgency

lead to crisis, and through the medium of conflict between actors. Further research is needed on the techniques used to legitimise political action, and this must take into account the multifarious de-legitimisation strategies also used to spread myths and mistruths and deflect blame and accountability on to political counterparts. It seems easier than ever for actors in society to become experts, to self-impose their own forms of authority and influence others.

Legitimisation signals the need for actors in the political sphere to develop and improve their dialogue with the public and in all areas of the political system. This dialogue should not obfuscate the essential illocutionary forces expressed in speech acts, such as apologising to the electorate (Butler 2016), or compromise other speech acts where a political position must be justified. Legitimisation strategies require a greater awareness not only of the psychosocial forces between social and political actors, but also of the cognitive linguistic interactive forces which can guide a political management strategy (Butler 2018).

In addition to the need for developing new legitimisation strategies, a more prominent place should be reserved for Proximisation Theory (Cap 2008, 2010, 2014) in which a spatial-temporal-axiological (STA) model is used for the justification of the controversial policy. Its main goal is to legitimise the policies and actions of the speaker and also to 'neutralize the growing impact of the negative, "foreign", "alien", "antagonistic", entities' (Cap 2014: 17). Proximisation Theory has already been used in a number of key studies, such as interventionist political discourse during the invasion of Iraq by the United States, and makes it possible to observe the multiplicity of rhetorical patterns reflected in legitimisation (Cap 2008, 2010). Whichever forms of legitimisation are identified by researchers, it is likely that future research in Legitimisation Studies may follow so long as crises remain and conflicts cannot be solved.

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