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O P O L S K I

Environmental Activism as Counter-hegemony? A Critical Discourse Analysis of (Self)representations of Radical Organizations across Cultures

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Overview

- Context: radical environmentalism (across cultures)
- Framework: environmentalism as counter-hegemony
- Question of cultural identity: how best to self-present to gain legitimacy and acceptability for an environmental organization/movement that has radical views/methods?
- Method: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)
- Material – online self-presentational manifestos
 - Extinction Rebellion (UK)
 - Deep Green Resistance (US)
 - Pracownia na rzecz wszystkich istot (PL)
- Results: Different counterhegemonic potentials across cultures expressed with different discursive strategies and projecting different cultural identities

leaflets open letters petitions
policy proposals independent risk assessments
boycotts banner drops pranks
public demonstrations and protests
media stunts sit-ins die-in performances
trespassing picketing traffic disruptions
production blockades lock-ups supergluing stunts
economic sabotage property damage

(Short, 1991; Rosteck & Frenz, 2009; Zelko, 2013; Klein, 2014)

**‘fighters for a lost cause’, ‘brainwashed lefties’,
‘dreamers’, ‘eco-terrorists’, ‘dangerous clowns’**



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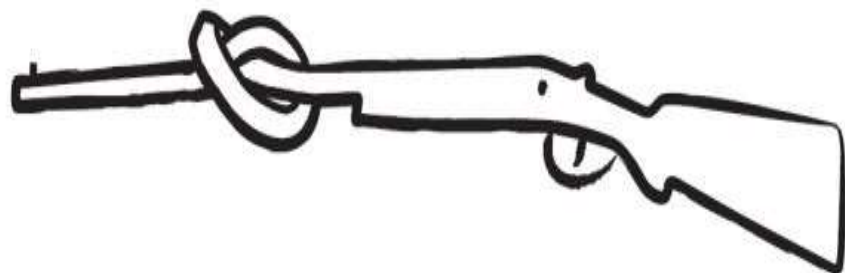
[FAQS](#)



OUR DEMANDS

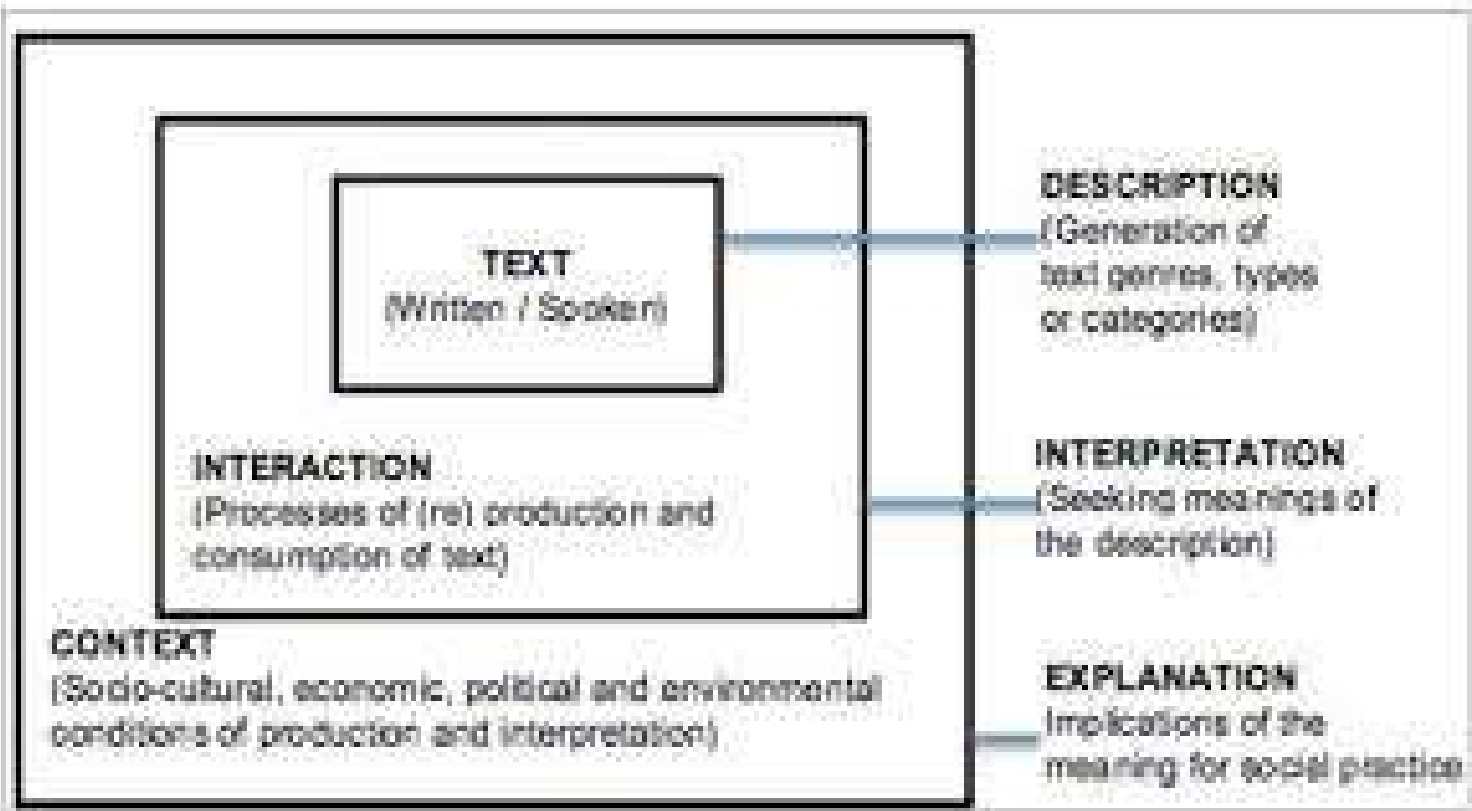
Environmentalism as counter-hegemony

- discourse **challenging** elite interests and national values and, in turn, facing cultural backlash (DeLuca, 1999)
- discourse **exposing 'sustainability'** as a hegemony's response to radical environmentalism aimed at diffusing the tension and disarming activists (Filho, 2000)
- discourse bypassing news/media organizations and thus capable of **reframing** the issue (Lakoff, 2010)
- discourse **pointing to inadequacy** of political responses to climate emergency (business as usual) (Klein, 2014)
- discourse **promoting opposition** to mainstream culture as a desirable, even necessary, social orientation and activity in a climate emergency (Wozniak, Lück & Wessler, 2015)



Cultural identities

- Group identities (imagined communities) are forged on the basis of **alignment** with an in-group against an out-group (Anderson, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1986)
- They are **performed as acts of identification** in self/other/issue presentation (van Dijk, 1998)
- They are **projected/reproduced** in communication practices (discourses) that are structured by social relations, institutions and **ideologies** and set over a course of time (here environmentalism, radicalism) (Collier, 2002).
- Identification may be a site of **struggle** (Mendoza, Halualani & Drzewiecka, 2009) with a counterhegemonic potential.



Critical Discourse Analysis

- CDA aims to **identify, interpret and explain** linguistic patterning typical of given thematic or institutional contexts in order to relate it to social and/or cognitive theory (Gee, 1999; Fairclough, 1993).
- CDA is thus fine-tuned to **expose the naturalized, culturally dominant representations** on the one hand, and to capture alternative frames, narratives and rhetorical devices that **undermine hegemonic discursive constructions** on the other (cf. Carvalho, 2005; Stamou & Paraskevopoulos, 2004; Hansen & Machin, 2008; Stibbe, 2014).
- CDA allows data-driven, inductive interpretations of relations between the content/style of the text and (1) the **possible intentions of the communicator**, as well as (2) the **likely effects on the audience**, especially if the analysis is properly contextualized and theoretically guided.

Sample

XR (word count 6750, 1 logo, 1 infographic, 3 photos)



1. About us (our story, our structure, our values)
2. Our demands
3. Beyond politics

DGR (word count 7100, 1 logo, 5 photos, 1 infographic)



1. About Deep Green Resistance
2. Guiding principles of Deep Green Resistance
3. The problem of civilization
4. The four phases of Decisive Ecological Warfare

PRWI (word count 5300, 1 logo, 1 drawing, 20 photos, 4 posters)



1. What we do
2. About us
3. Results of our actions

Coding categories

1. **linguistic** categories used in CDA: (1) **actors** (nouns/proper names for entities, organizations and individuals classified as 'us' or 'them'); (2) **circumstances** (nouns for places and phrases for geographical and social positionings of these actors); (3) **attributes** (modifiers used to characterize actors); (4) **predicates** (verbs, including imperatives, for preferred actions and activities).
2. accompanying **visuals** (photos, infographics, design): illustration, anchorage or relay;
3. **rhetorical** appeals: (1) **logos** (information, fact/figure), (2) **pathos** (evaluative and/or emotive expression, intensifiers and emphasis), (3) **ethos** (evidentiality and credibility achieved by attributions to authoritative sources, e.g., science, regulations)

Counter-hegemonic potential of XR: socio-political

- **renaming** *climate change* as *climate emergency/crisis/collapse* to impress urgency and to overcome complacency in mainstream nomenclature in contrast to the techno-optimistic stances and narratives of the elites;
- **condoning** non-violent **disruptive** protest and **encouraging** people of all walks of life to risk getting arrested by mass participation in stunts;
- **inspiring** people to forego their short-term economic interests (low electricity bills) and comfort (risk of getting a criminal record) for the **common cause** (think global, act local);
- **criticizing** administrators for **watering down** ambitious climate targets;
- organizing climate-oriented **citizen assemblies** as alternative bodies to produce information on the society's preferred directions of climate policies.

Counter-hegemonic potential of DGR: socio-economic

- evidencing that the depletion of natural resources is intertwined with the values of **capitalism and patriarchy**, which need to be shed immediately;
- justifying belowground **resistance and sabotage** as completing aboveground campaigning as a coordinated **strategy in four phases**;
- exposing 'industrial civilization' as deeply exploitative and undemocratic and showcasing possible **alternative** 'human civilizations' that are far more 'sane' and 'sustainable';
- **subverting** the cultural values and the economic logic of the American Dream and related hegemonic **orders of privilege** in the US and beyond;
- justifying **militant** resistance as an ethical course of action.

Counter-hegemonic potential of PRWI: socio-cultural

- calling to stop development/consumerist-driven **investments** that threaten the well-being of local communities;
- bringing back the idea of '**the commons**' – a problematic cultural formation;
- championing the 'right to life' of **non-human creatures**, thus subverting the idea that humans enjoy dominion over nature (inherited through the Judeo-Christian tradition);
- subverting the notion that some established **traditions** associated with Polish 'national identity' and culture (e.g., hunting, eating meat) should be continued given the new ecological and social circumstances;
- exposing the legislators' **complicity in destruction of nature** under the guise of stimulating the economy;

Preliminary conclusions

- **systematic differences** in political, economic, social arrangements impinge on the ways environmentalist discourses are constructed to achieve legitimacy and acceptability;
- **common themes** (sixth extinction, industrial lobby, the commons) to be explored;
- interplay between explicit mentions of environmental values in manifestos and **implicit** (not articulated, but logically projected through reasoning and identification) **criticisms of economic governance and consumerism in activated cultural knowledge.**
- compromise: mobilizing without alienating

Selected references

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