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Conclusion

Brought into dialogue with news and current affairs, social theory has the potential to greatly improve the quality of public understanding of social and political issues. The opening chapters of *Why Current Affairs Needs Social Theory* indicated the deracinated, uprooted, character of television news and routine newspaper reports, revealing the absence of the contextualization that would facilitate genuine understanding. This was combined with a brief discussion of the audience reception of such reports. Through reference to academic studies of audience response to news and current affairs accounts on different issues, from the United States, the United Kingdom and Scandinavia, a picture emerged of audiences whose grasp of events tended to mirror key aspects of the ways in which news had been presented to them.

The absence of an illuminating provision of social context in the reports themselves – one that embedded events within their relevant socio-structural context – was thus reflected in a lack of appreciation of the significance of context on the part of audiences. It was seen that audiences have a tendency to think about events and processes in naïve, overly free-floating, individualistic, ways. It was argued that this inadequacy, and the accompanying vulnerability to, the rhetoric of news and current affairs, needs to be countered by a substantial change in the character of audience reception. That is, there is a need for audiences to become more keenly aware of how different forms and contents of news affects and influences them, and to cultivate a set of intellectual resources allowing them to interpret what they receive in a more critical manner. These are intellectual resources creating the capacity to see how much a current affairs account has provided of the context required to genuinely understand a particular story. Is it possible, for example, on the basis of what has been provided, to think adequately about causation, or about strategic approaches to improving the situation reported on? Have allusions to such aspects been included in the report's 'definition of the situation'? How adequately have these aspects then been treated? Has enough of context been provided to merit the moral position taken by the news account?

The book has aimed to provide audiences with the intellectual tools and resources required to develop critical capacities to the point they routinely incorporate such questions into their reception of news and current affairs. Chapter 2 saw the introduction of the key social-theoretical idea of a contextual field, whose purpose is to facilitate the ability of readers and viewers to situate the spectacle or drama of current affairs events within relevant networks of social relations. The *objective elements* of the contextual field were introduced here, and it was suggested these could be used to map out the historical and geographical context provided by any news or current affairs story, providing a provisional set of orienting co-ordinates from which much else could follow. The case study of Sandy, a single mother of two young children searching for somewhere to live in a contemporary American city, was drawn on to indicate what these objective circumstances looked like from the perspective of someone caught up in their web. It was shown that the objective matrix of constraints and limited opportunities facing Sandy (her *strategic context*), or any situated social actor, can also be looked at from a researcher's point of view, and that this often allows the exploration of a broader set of forces creating and sustaining the social forces bearing down on an individual, limiting their own power and possibilities. Audiences were encouraged to take the perspectives of such objectively situated actors, and to explore their actions from this standpoint, but also to explore the objective circumstances affecting situated actors from an external observer's perspective. Attention was also drawn to the need for audiences to develop an awareness of how much and how little a current affairs account has told them about such situations, and about the matrices of forces that bear on them.

The objective characteristics of contextual fields were complemented, in Chapter 3, by the introduction of the *subjective elements* populating these fields. The narration and analysis of a single episode, 'State Visit', from the Danish political drama, *Borgen*, was used to demonstrate how both sets of elements are interwoven within the events and processes of social life, and that a mapping of both sets of elements is required in order to grasp the stories emerging from them. The use of *Borgen* allowed us to see that audiences already deploy procedures of mapping in the way they interpret political drama, and that they intuitively deploy sophisticated conceptual tools in doing so. It was suggested this should make us optimistic and ambitious about the possibility of such skills being transposed to the analysis of news and current affairs. The sophistication already in place provides a solid base on which to encourage audiences to become more explicitly aware of the skills they possess, and to further refine both their background concepts and the ways in which they routinely apply them to the particulars of specific accounts.

Chapters 4 and 5 saw the intellectual resources provided by social theory applied, step by step, to a range of news and current affairs items from across the world, and from different genres. These case studies illustrated key aspects of putting social theory to use in the interpretation of current affairs texts. Particular attention was paid to the ability of audiences to identify the *status* of knowledge provided by a current affairs item; the patchwork nature of the kinds of knowledge provided within a single piece; the connections that can be made between different pieces, including from a range of genres; and to how audiences can assess the *adequacy* of the knowledge they are provided with in a current affairs item in relation to the claims that the item makes for that knowledge, or in relation to the knowledge required by audiences for their various purposes.

An aspect emphasized in these case studies was the significant critical purchase to be gained from focusing on individual concepts. The general, transposable, concept of 'interdependence' was used as an illustration of this in Chapter 4, with the emphasis placed on the relation between this abstract concept and the specific shape it takes in particular circumstances. The abstract concept can prompt and guide readers to think in terms of interdependent relationships, and as such can direct them to look for both objective and subjective manifestations of this as they attempt to map out the specifics of a particular current affairs story. In being guided to the relevant objective and subjective dimensions of interdependency within an account, theoretically informed audiences will also naturally bring other germane concepts into the picture. It is a small, and easy, step from here to taking a close interest in the 'fit' between these concepts and the empirical evidence made available by the current affairs account in focus. This concern with the relation between general concepts, social processes in particular times and places, and relevant empirical evidence, provides a firm, routine basis for systematic rigour about the quality of the claims made within current affairs pieces. These are ways of ascertaining the degree to which current affairs pieces embed the events they cover in the 'networks of relevant relations' within which they can become genuinely understandable.

This conceptual focus is consolidated, in turn, by the devices introduced to facilitate comparison between stories with respect to the geographical and historical scales they are pitched at, the kind of focus they entail, and the level of corresponding detail they provide. I refer here to the idea of 'floating' and 'contextualized' accounts, to the distinction between accounts that focus on just one causal factor embedded within a network of relations and those that focus on a plurality of such factors, and to the differentiation between accounts that get 'inside the heads' of actors and those that don't. The account of the *Borgen* episode in Chapter 3 serves as an invaluable benchmark, or point of reference, in all these respects, given its high degree of contextualization, the

plural character of the causal forces involved, and the intricate combination of objective and subjective factors implicated in the unfolding of events. One only needs to think of the stark contrast between the account of the *Borgen* episode and the analysis of the *Independent's* sparse report on Netanyahu and settler homes in Chapter 4 to grasp the critical value of these stratagems for comparison. The contrasts between the varying accounts addressing the poor treatment of patients in the UK National Health Service in Chapter 5 provide similar lessons. All of these theoretical and methodological devices serve to heighten awareness as to the status and adequacy of the knowledge provided by any particular account.

The examples presented in Chapters 4 and 5, however, only begin to scratch the surface of the variety of uses and insights to be gained from a heightened awareness of social theory focused around the notion of contextual fields. Each new case study will reveal fresh insights and will provide audiences with new angles of seeing and interpreting. Also, as mentioned at the outset, the aspects of social theory that I've drawn on here are not the only ones that can be drawn on. This poses a challenge to other traditions of social theory. It can only be to the good if theorists working within these other traditions can also find ways of directly engaging with the language and the concerns of news and current affairs, providing insights that can help audiences to make greater sense of social events and processes. If these can be articulated with the insights from the traditions in this book, thus enriching the stocks of knowledge available to audiences in a readily coherent manner, then that would be doubly positive. If we find there are tensions between theoretical approaches as they engage directly with current affairs in this way, then that, too, can be fruitful, deepening our sense of the challenges that exist and further resisting a retreat back into overly simple readings of overly simple texts.

Why Current Affairs Needs Social Theory has self-consciously directed its arguments primarily towards audiences, to developing the intellectual resources and tools through which audiences can alter the routine ways in which they approach current affairs. At heart it is boldly idealistic. It pictures a drawn-out process in which audiences begin to apply the theoretical guidelines and tools when they listen to the radio, read the newspaper in hard copy or online, watch the television news or a current affairs documentary and, mixing genres further, when they go to the cinema, read a novel or look at a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph. At first, they may apply this knowledge, and these sensibilities, intermittently, and progress will be slow. But before too long, the ways of seeing will start to seem second nature, becoming embodied and natural (in what we have called their *habitus*). As this happens, the pace of progress should quicken, with the application less occasional, more customary, simply becoming part of the culture of how things are done around here.

Audiences are in many ways the easiest targets. Each individual reader or viewer has a good deal of autonomy to take on the challenge of developing their capacity to interpret current affairs texts at a qualitatively higher level. One should remember, also, that individual members of audiences are also members of larger institutions of many kinds, and will take their sensibilities and their ways of seeing into those institutions. Some of these individuals within institutions will be what Nicos Mouzelis has called mega-actors, in that, because of the social power and influence given to them by their position within an institution, and within the broader contextual field, their example and their actions will have effects on far more people, and often in many more spatial sites, than the actions of an individual with little social power. In a cultural contest between different ways of seeing, the battle for the hearts and minds of audiences can be truly consequential.

Journalists have been mentioned from time to time through the book, partly because journalists are also members of audiences, but also partly because one naturally shouldn't ignore their key institutional role as mediators between events and processes in-the-world and events and processes as they appear in-the-news. They are not an easy target for a book like this, because there are all kinds of institutional pressures and constraints pushing them to tell stories in certain kinds of ways, and which would discourage their telling them in ways more in tune with the message of this book. Nevertheless, it must be a hope that some of the lessons of social theory could rub off on some journalists some of the time, and that it is therefore not only the audience reception of current affairs that will develop, but also the ways in which current affairs are presented. For the positioning of journalists within society means that they certainly, often, have the capacity to be mega-actors.

Finally, to extend the sense of the work that the current argument has left still to be done, but also to indicate that it has provided the necessary groundwork for such work, I want to introduce a further sense of *objectivity* to the three spelt out in Chapter 2 (see pages 30–1). This, fourth, sense of objectivity is, in some ways curiously, the one most usually discussed in public discussion of news and current affairs, even though it is probably the most difficult to consider seriously, and even though logically it should depend on a thoughtful engagement with the first three. This, fourth sense of objectivity, is the idea of objectivity as fairness achieved through the absence of bias, where an absence of bias is understood as a somehow 'neutral' view of what is going on in the world. Such a position cannot logically be underpinned by the untenable, impossible, idea of 'a view from nowhere': a view that somehow transcends the narrowing of all situated perspectives, all value-commitments, and somehow tells it like it is. This seems to be understood, at least intuitively, as most typically the quest for neutrality is pursued by the attempt to let both sides of an argument have their say, or, where there are more than two sides,

to let several voices be heard. So far, so good. But then we are left with the very real, pragmatic, question of how current affairs forums, or cultures as a whole, are to judge between accounts told from different perspectives, and so achieve a certain level of objectivity in the sum of what is presented.

The arguments in this book can't solve such a problem by themselves, but they do provide the grounds to begin thinking about this question in a more adequate way. We have insisted that all current affairs accounts are told from a certain situated perspective, and that values will inevitably enter into such a perspective, consciously or pre-consciously. We have also insisted, however, that we can judge the rigour and adequacy of each of these stories on the grounds of the three kinds of objectivity outlined in Chapter 2 (ontological, methodological and epistemological), and which have been developed in more prosaic language throughout the book. That is, we have learnt to hold statements about the world to account in terms of (i) how they have *conceptualized* the objective and subjective aspects of the world they are making claims about; (ii) the extent to which they have gathered *evidence* about those conceptualized aspects they have included in their claims; and (iii) whether the knowledge claims included in the statements about the world drawn from stages (i) and (ii) are adequate or inadequate – or *adequate enough* when judged by reasonable standards – including the 'fit' between concepts and evidence claims.

Stories, or accounts, told from different perspectives on the same set of events must consequently first be judged on whether their own claims to objectivity stand up to scrutiny. This is to impose strict, but surely reasonable, criteria of adequacy on any account told from any value perspective. Accounts that don't meet these standards should naturally be seen as suspect in terms of their contribution to 'balance'. The concern to give voice to a variety of perspectives should always be tied, as far as possible, to a concern with their objectivity in terms of the three basic criteria we have discussed. That is, it can't be a positive thing to want to give oxygen to accounts of the world and its people that can be shown to misrepresent those worlds. One should, rather, try to include a range of perspectives, but hold them to high standards of objectivity. Any conception of 'balance' – of allowing all relevant voices to be heard – needs to be built upon these foundations. It should go without saying, by now, that each one of the stories told by these voices will need to be considered in terms of their networks of relevant relations – their contextual field – if they are to truly further comprehension and understanding. We have repeatedly seen that providing such context presents all kinds of challenges to both audiences and producers of current affairs.

Audiences and media outlets shouldn't stop here, however. They should ultimately take the further step of using the apparatus of social theory and contextual fields to begin a genuine dialogue *between* adequate-enough

accounts from different perspectives. This is particularly so when such accounts involve some kind of head-on clash. It is useful to employ here the famous method of dialectics, central to the work of the great German thinkers Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx and long incorporated into the more thoughtful realms of popular culture. In the terms of dialectics, the account offered from one current affairs point of view, replete with views of causation, moral judgements and suggestions for future strategy, can be thought of as offering an initial *thesis*. Another current affairs account on the same topic from a conflicting point of view, containing a different set of moral judgements and a different set of proposed remedies, can be thought of as the *antithesis*. Serious dialogue and debate between the two accounts would naturally keep looking at how adequate these two accounts are when looked at in terms of the first three forms of objectivity. For it is important that the proponents of each recognize the extent to which the other's account is objective, and continue to be aware of this. This should include an evaluation of what each account says about the situated experiences of the people at the heart of the stories, and of how they convey those subjective experiences as intertwined with a picture of their objective conditions of existence. Objectivity should also mean interpreting both sets of accounts in such a way that neither is distorted nor impoverished.

If both accounts could be seen as adequate enough on these grounds, then it should be a requirement of responsible dialogue to search for points of agreement or *synthesis* between the two accounts. If these cannot be found, then the points of continued disagreement and contestation would be likely to have become clear in the process of attempting agreement. In such cases, one would then need to carefully explore the normative or other as yet unexplored underpinnings of the continued clash of views. One wonders, for example, what a dialogue between accounts provided by a variety of different groups within Israel and Palestine would look like if held to these disciplined standards.

This briefly sketched idea clearly needs a great deal of further unpacking, and even to mention it takes us beyond the specific arguments of this book. I have mentioned it, nevertheless, because it is suggestive of the long view, of the kind of further progress that could be made once the first steps, of the kind that *are* dwelt on in the book, have been taken and the accompanying skills consolidated. It is suggestive of the fertile possibilities that are opened up by taking our readings and viewings of news and current affairs as seriously as they should be taken.