

Discourses of Remembrance

Erika Marie Kirkpatrick

Abstract

This article uses the post-structural approach to analyze primary sources about Remembrance Day. Through deconstruction of the use of language in media sources from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom this piece reviles the relationship between how societies discuss war and their willingness to use force in international relations. The use of binary pairs and dichotomization of language allow for this piece to explore the political implications of what it terms the "Remembrance Day Discourse."

Remembrance Day, Veteran's Day, Armistice Day are all titles for the same date observed in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. That date is November 11th. The day the First World War ended. Upon reading the first three phrases of this essay particular images may come to mind: poppies, medals of valour, flags at half mast, the lonely call of a trumpet. This essay will use a post-structural approach to explore how the date of November 11th has been infused with a particular meaning and significance in these societies which serves a political end beyond the act of collective remembrance of the First World War. To begin, it will briefly explain the approach of post-structuralism in order to establish the methodology behind the critical analysis of November 11th which follows. Of specific importance is the explanation of the concept of *discourse* as it plays a particular role in the following analysis. Secondly, this essay will use major English speaking newspaper articles that contain the words Remembrance Day OR Veteran's Day OR Armistice Dayⁱ, written on November 11, 2009. This investigation will be centered on the language used in these headlines in order to clarify the discourse which surrounds November 11th in American, Canadian and British society. Last of all this essay will offer a critical analysis of how November 11th has been constructed and imbibed into the socialization of these societies and the possible political implications thereof.

Post-structuralism is not a theory of international relations, rather it is a critical approach that concerns itself with the importance of how things are represented, the role of identity politics in the formation and understanding of international affairs and, issues of power and knowledge (Campbell, 2007: 206). Methodologically post-structuralism rejects positivism and the empiricist assumptions it is based on. These assumptions are threefold: first, is empirical realism, the view that there is an external world whose existence and meaning is wholly independent of the actions of the observer. Secondly, the idea that there is a universal scientific language which allows a detached and dispassionate observation of events, issues and actors. Finally, empiricism claims that statements about the world are true if they correspond with facts and false if they do not (Campbell, 2007: 208). The goal of a poststructuralist methodology is to challenge the above accepted norms and methods of knowledge generation about the world and instead offer a critical approach to the study of events, actors and issues.

Post-structuralism relies heavily on the concept of *discourse* in its analyses of issues, actors and events in international relations. Discourse is described as "the

language and representations through which we describe and understand the world, and through which meanings, identities and social relations are produced” (Campbell, 2007: 333). Coupled with the concept of discourse is a concern with interior/exterior dichotomizations of language wherein that which is considered to be the self and good is ‘inside’ while that which is considered the other and wrong is ‘outside’. This translates into an understanding of language and behaviour which suggests that an understanding of that which is ‘inside’ is conditional upon the understanding of that which is ‘outside’ (Campbell, 2007: 215). Thus, concepts such as ‘freedom’ are conditional upon concepts of ‘oppression;’ ‘justice’ upon ‘injustice;’ ‘honor’ upon ‘disgrace;’ ‘praise’ upon ‘condemnation;’ ‘war’ upon ‘peace;’ and ‘appreciation’ upon ‘contempt.’ Critiques of this dualism seek to explain the cultural practices which give these binary pairs their meaning and significance in relation to the event, issue or actor they describe (Campbell, 2007: 215). The use of discourse theory in this essay recognizes that the language and representations used in describing November 11th in media reports reinforces specific understandings of war, its participants, its uses and its desirability in American, Canadian and British society.

In a quick overview of eleven newspaper article headlines from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom five make reference to the act of remembering through the use of words such as: “remember” (Goldstein, 2009), “remembrance” (Bet-El, 2009), “forget” (Woloshyn, 2009), and “haunt” (Vietnam Myth, 2009). Several headlines¹¹ make use of language which implies a debt through the use of such phrases as: “deserve a hearing” (Vietnam Myths, 2009), “gratitude” (Harris, 2009), “sacrifices” (Humanity, 2009), “much thanks” (Bel-El, 2009), “needed him most” (Worthington, 2009), “lost generation” (Meikle, 2009) and, “owe more than we can repay” (Kay, 2009). They also use language that can be equated with praise and glorification using such words as: “tribute” (Harris, 2009), “honor” (Kay, 2009), and “respect” (Courtland, 2009). Just through this simple exercise of analyzing specific uses of language in headlines, a picture of the discourse surrounding November 11th in our society becomes somewhat clearer. The accepted norms for discussions of, or actions on, November 11th fall broadly into three categories: remembering, thanking and praising. Following the clarification of the discourse in which November 11th is imbedded in Western societies this essay turns next to a critical analysis of the possible political implications of this discourse.

One of the articles chosen as an example for this essay implores that we “...honour and remember... not to glorify war ... war is the worst thing and the very last thing a nation should ever embark on, even when the cause is just and no matter how grievous the wrongs we are trying to right. But we do it because we realize there are moments in our history when blood is the price that freedom demands” (Goldstein, 2009). This excerpt, albeit short, serves as a prime example of the discourse surrounding November 11th in American, Canadian and British society. It reflects an attitude of acceptance within these societies which frames the issue of war, those who participate in it and its usefulness as a just and righteous, yet deplorable, cause which we must strive to remember in our collective national consciousness.

If one adopts a dualistic critique of the use of language in these articles certain political implications may be revealed. Of specific interest in the above statement is a theme which runs through many newspaper articles, media reports, speeches, remembrance ceremonies and private conversations: the idea that sacrifices made in war

are done so in the name of ‘freedom’, specifically ‘our’ freedom. To be free is associated with the interior, the self, that which is good and right. In the November 11th language in particular freedom is construed to be something that we possess, something that can at any moment be taken from us, and something that we owe to those who died in war. The political and social implication of such a concept is the implicit justification and perpetuation of the institutions of warfare and the military in our societies. Through framing the issue as: ‘war is necessary for freedom’ the discourse surrounding November 11th perpetuates collective justifications of the use of force. The dichotomization infuses our society with a sense of moral imperative and responsibility to uphold freedom at all costs. The ultimate political implication is the false and dangerous notion of the inevitability and innate nature of warfare.

In the realm of international relations the above implication serves to promote and encourage cooperation in armed conflict among the societies in which the identified November 11th discourse is most prevalent: Canada, the United States and Britain. Leaders in these societies, who make decisions on whether or not to use armed force in foreign policy are, after all acquainted with the same mainstream dichotomizations as the rest of the society. Choices to use force in international relations rely heavily on the dualisms outlined above. Wars are packaged and sold to the public by political leaders, through media outlets, as being just, righteous, and necessary for the preservation of freedom. As the analysis of the November 11th discourse outlined above exposes, the way in which war is packaged and sold can be directly related to the way in which these societies understand war, its participants, its uses and its desirability. A specific example which reflects this phenomenon is the choice of the Canadian government to participate in the Afghanistan war in cooperation with Britain and the United States, yet its refusal to cooperate with these same actors in the Iraq War. The way in which the Afghanistan conflict was packaged and sold to Canadians, both citizens and political leaders, represented it as being necessary for freedom, it was billed as part of a war on ‘terror.’ A particular construction was put forth of it as being a just war, an honourable endeavor in nation building. The support of NATO allies and the UN for the mission served to reinforce these images of justice and righteousness. On the other hand the Iraq War went against the advice of the UN and was unilaterally pursued by a ‘coalition of the willing’ led by the United States. Thus, the Canadian public and its political leaders viewed the use of force as unjust and unwarranted. The concept of the Iraq War as being necessary for freedom did not take hold in Canadian society or within the Canadian political establishment.

This essay used the post-structural approach to explore and analyze the discourse which surrounds November 11th in Canadian, American and British societies and the possible political implications thereof. In putting forth this analysis this essay does not presume to suggest that all the uses of armed force in these societies is caused by the specific discourse it termed “the November 11th discourse.” Rather it proposes that the language and dichotomizations which infuse media reports, speeches, and discussions on, or of, November 11th are part of a wider phenomenon of how conceptualizations and representations of warfare, and how it is remembered, in society affect that society’s willingness to use force. This is not to suggest that the act of remembrance causes warfare but rather that the particular way in which the acts of remembrance within certain societies are constructed affect societal acceptances of the use of force. Post-structuralism

is uniquely suited to such an analysis due to its emphasis of the importance of discourse and its rejection of empiricist methods.

ⁱ As typed into LexusNexus Academic advanced search, with connectors, using the specific date of November 11, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Note there is overlap in the number of headlines in each category.

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