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Online Publication Date: 01 November 2008

To cite this Article Watt, Paul(2008)‘Underclass’ and ‘ordinary people’ discourses: Representing/re-presenting council tenants in a housing campaign’, Critical Discourse Studies, 5:4, 345 — 357
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17405900802405288
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17405900802405288

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‘Underclass’ and ‘ordinary people’ discourses: Representing/re-presenting council tenants in a housing campaign

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This paper employs critical discourse analysis to examine discourses of council (public) housing tenants. It focuses upon one example of housing activism, a local campaign that mobilized in opposition to a proposed stock transfer of council housing in South East England. The hegemonic societal-wide discourse regarding council tenants is that they constitute a socially excluded ‘underclass’, as in New Labour urban policy and the mass media. In contrast, the paper demonstrates how the housing campaign presented a counter-hegemonic discourse of tenants as ‘ordinary people’. Drawing upon a textual analysis of campaign literature and letters to local newspapers, the paper illustrates how this populist discourse abjured an explicit reference to class identity, but at the same time managed to effectively signify class inequality.

Keywords: working class; underclass; class identity; habitus; council tenants; stock transfer; housing activism; New Labour; neoliberalism; rhetoric; newspaper letters

Discourse analysis, urban/housing studies and council housing

Researchers in the related fields of urban studies and housing studies have made considerable use of discourse analysis in order to illuminate various aspects of regeneration and housing policy (Hastings, 2000; Lees, 2004; Jacobs, 2006). This paper argues that this discourse analytic approach has thus far tended to concentrate on the readily available texts of state and quasi-state agencies rather than any other groups involved in the urban/housing policy process. In particular, it has under-examined the texts and discursive practices of activists who contest the parameters set by policy makers. This paper considers one example of housing activism, a campaign that mobilized in opposition to a proposed stock transfer of council (public) rental housing in Wycombe District, a local authority area in southeast England outside London. The paper examines the campaign literature and letters to newspapers with reference to critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the work of Norman Fairclough (1995, 2000) and John Richardson (2007).

Discourse analysts have developed a rich seam of research within urban studies and housing studies during the last decade. This work has been undertaken from a variety of theoretical approaches that share an anti-positivist epistemology (Jacobs, 2006) combined with what Hastings (2000, p. 138; original emphasis) refers to as ‘critical potential’. Amongst others, these approaches include Foucaultian governmentality theory (Stenson & Watt, 1999; Flint, 2002), social constructionism (Jacobs, Kemeney, & Manzi, 2003a, b) and CDA (Jacobs, 2004; Marston, 2004). In his insightful overview paper, Keith Jacobs (2006) summarizes the criticisms that have been levelled at discourse analysis in relation to urban policy, notably that it is idealist and insufficiently attuned either to political economic concerns or to the perspectives of those who seek to challenge urban injustice (see Lees, 2004). In response, Jacobs emphasizes the connectedness of discourse analysis to wider social practices and structural inequalities: ‘the methodological assumption that informs

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ISSN 1740-5904 print/ISSN 1740-5912 online
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DOI: 10.1080/17405900802405288
http://www.informaworld.com
discourse-based approaches is that politics is an arena in which different interest groups seek to establish a particular narrative or version of events as a means to pursue political objectives' (Jacobs, 2006, p. 39). However, despite recognizing the plurality of interest groups vis-à-vis narrative construction, Jacobs’s (2006, pp. 47–49) own putative research agenda remains surprisingly located within a narrow ontological framework, one circumscribed by the texts of policy makers. Whilst one of his four ‘future possibilities’ rightly addresses the under-examined discursive practice of text consumption in relation to audiences’ reception of policy texts, an issue that is discussed below, what is missing are the ways that non-government interest groups, including those who contest urban policy, are themselves engaged in discourse production both in terms of texts as well as talk.

This lacuna in Jacobs’s paper reflects a wider ontological bias within urban/housing discourse analysis, one that tends to prioritize readily available official texts. Thus Hastings (2000, p. 133) has noted a tendency in housing-related discourse analysis ‘to focus quite narrowly on official published documents, such as legislative papers or announcements of new initiatives’. By insufficiently foregrounding points of contestation to urban/housing policy-making and implementation, discourse analysts’ anti-positivism falls somewhat short of fulfilling the critical potential that Hastings adduces for it.

More specifically, in relation to council rental housing in the UK, the emphasis, particularly in Foucaultian and social constructionist-inspired studies, tends to be placed upon how tenants are surveyed, classified, regulated and controlled as target ‘problem’ populations via state and other official discourses (see inter alia Stenson & Watt, 1999; Watt & Jacobs, 2000; Flint, 2002; Jacobs et al., 2003a, b). Tenants’ voices as discourse producers in their own right are typically marginal in such studies, whilst tenants’ subjectivities tend to be constituted via official power-knowledge policy matrices. This is not to argue, however, that no studies have considered public housing tenants’ discourses; several such studies exist drawing upon CDA, for example Marston (2004) and Taylor’s (1999) pioneering analysis of stock transfer in Scotland. Whilst recognizing the very important contribution made by such studies, there remains considerable potential for a truly critical discourse analysis to examine how public housing tenants are discursively inserted into neoliberal transformations of contemporary urban space in relation to the critical urbanism that Lees (2004) highlights. Such a research agenda should also consider how tenants are actively engaged in ‘contest[ing] neoliberalism’ (Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007), for example via opposing stock transfers, the subject of this paper.

Since 1980, UK council housing has declined precipitously, largely as a result of Thatcherite and New Labour policies. These include ‘stock transfer’, the large-scale voluntary transfer (LSVT) policy in which council tenants are balloted on whether or not they wish to transfer landlords away from the local authority to a ‘registered social landlord’ (RSL) a.k.a. housing association (Ginsburg, 2005). LSVT began in England in 1988 under a Conservative government, but since 1997 it has been given greater impetus under New Labour. Despite RSLs/housing associations being nominally ‘social housing’ organizations equivalent to local authority landlords, considerable differences exist such that anti-transfer campaigns such as ‘Defend Council Housing’ (2006) describe stock transfer with some justification as ‘privatization’ (Ginsburg, 2005). Stock transfer is certainly ‘a contested policy’ (McCormack, 2008, p. 5), and although most ballots in England have resulted in transfer, the programme has not gone unopposed by tenants (Ginsburg, 2005; Defend Council Housing, 2006; McCormack, 2008), as I show in this paper.

Unlike other areas of the British welfare state, such as the National Health Service, council housing has always been a distinctly working-class public service which has only ever tangentially housed the middle classes (Watt, 2005, 2006). Not only has council housing contracted dramatically in England (13.1% of households, 2001 Census), its class constituency has also shifted away from accommodating a broad cross-section of manual workers and their families
in the early post-war period (Jacobs et al., 2003a), to an economically deprived class fraction comprising households with non-existent/marginal labour market engagement (pensioners, the sick and disabled, lone parents and the unemployed) alongside low-paid/low-skilled workers (Watt, 2006). Although council housing remains ‘working-class housing’, only a minority of the working class are council tenants.

Redrawing ‘them and us’: the hegemonic ‘underclass’ discourse on council tenants

Material class inequality has widened in the UK during the last 30 years and yet contemporary class identity is perplexingly less sharply delineated than it was during the early post-war period (Savage, 2000; Wills, 2008). In particular, ‘working class’ identity is less prominent and can even be a source of stigma, as Skeggs (1997) incisively shows. Savage (2000) has also noted a widespread avoidance of an explicit class vocabulary regarding identities and instead a preference for people, including the middle classes, to describe themselves in terms of ‘ordinariness’.

Despite the general erosion of cohesive, clear-cut class identities and images, policy and mass media discourses of council housing are if anything more cohesive. Whilst politicians and the media discursively constructed council tenants as ‘affluent’ and ‘privileged’ during the 1960s (Jacobs et al., 2003a), the contemporary hegemonic discourse regarding council housing is that its occupants constitute a socially excluded, economically inactive and politically apathetic ‘underclass’. Council tenants occupy the defective ‘other’ category in New Labour’s Third Way urban/housing policy, a category against which ‘normal’ British citizens are counterposed in relation to employment, anti-social behaviour, active citizenship, etc. (see inter alia Watt & Jacobs, 2000; Flint, 2002; Jacobs et al., 2003b). The New Labour discourse on council housing congeals around an ideological imagery of tenants which constructs them as lying outside the national citizenry, as an anachronistic ‘race apart’ (an ‘underclass’) in need of a hefty dose of ‘modernization’ (Fairclough, 2000; Haylett, 2001).

Moreover this ideological imagery is one that redraws socio-economic inequality along epiphenomenal lines of housing tenure rather than fundamental lines of capital and class. Notwithstanding the recent declining significance of class identity, social historians suggest that the bulk of the early twentieth-century English industrial working class had an ideologically ill-defined class consciousness, one rooted in what McKibbin (1998, p. 139) refers to as ‘a kind of folk-Marxism quite independent of actual party-political allegiances’. This folk-Marxism was intertwined with strong ‘them and us’ attitudes that reproduced a cynical suspicion of ‘them’, which typically meant ‘the bosses’ (employers and managers) but could potentially embrace any group in an institutional position of power and authority over ordinary working people, including professionals and state officials. Such ‘them and us’ attitudes remain embedded within the contemporary urban working-class experience irrespective of housing tenure. For example, in Allen’s (2008) Bourdieuvian account of housing and regeneration in Liverpool, his working-class respondents’ habitus is constituted by scepticism and antagonism towards housing market and regeneration agencies. Such agencies inhabit a social space based upon an exchange-value orientation to an abstract ‘market for houses’, a space that is remote from that of working-class homeowners who instead share a use-value orientation to ‘their homes’.

Although New Labour dropped ‘underclass’ from its lexicon of welfare imagery, as Fairclough (2000) documents, ‘the behavioural and moral delinquency which it suggests has carried over into the construction of social exclusion’ (Fairclough, 2000, p. 52; also Watt & Jacobs, 2000). Mass media images of council tenants tend to replicate this underclass/social exclusion discourse, but with a cruder moralistic emphasis (Richardson, 2007, pp. 139–143) as for example seen in the recent ‘chav’ phenomenon (Hayward & Yar, 2006).
The dominant discourse maybe hegemonic but, as Fairclough (1995, p. 76) reminds us, hegemony is never complete and is instead in a state of ‘unstable equilibrium’. Spaces open up for resistance and contestation in relation to what can often appear to be an inevitable neoliberal juggernaut (Leitner et al., 2007). Indeed it is the discursive appearance of inevitability that provides neoliberalism with its most potent ideological weapon in the ongoing struggle for hegemony. As Fairclough (2000, p. viii) says, ‘the language of New Labour tells us “there is no alternative” – neo-liberalism is something with which we have to live’. As mentioned above, one protest group that does offer an alternative is DCH, which has campaigned against stock transfer and for direct public investment in council housing since the late 1990s (Defend Council Housing, 2006). DCH has played important advisory and resource roles for local campaigns which have set up across Britain in response to stock transfer proposals and ballots, including ‘Hands Off Our Homes’, which I will now discuss.

The research

This paper concerns a failed attempt by Wycombe District Council (WDC) to transfer over 7000 local authority rental properties to a not-for-profit housing company called Wycombe 2000 Housing that would have operated as an RSL. The focus is the ‘Hands Off Our Homes’ (HOOH) campaign that mobilized against transfer and for direct public investment in council housing over the year leading up to the tenant ballot in July–August 2000. The research is based primarily on an analysis of documents, including HOOH campaign literature, minutes of HOOH and WDC meetings, letters to the local press, newspaper articles and WDC transfer literature. Using library archives, all letters and articles on the proposed transfer in two local newspapers, the Bucks Free Press (BFP) and the Bucks Free Press Midweek (MW) were analyzed from July 1999 to September 2000, plus all the relevant articles in the Marlow Free Press (MFP) over the same period. The textual analysis is supplemented with interview and observational data (cf. Taylor, 1999; Marston, 2004). The former consists of a 3 hour interview with ‘Mike’, a council tenant, trade union activist and committed Marxist who was prominent in HOOH. Mike gave me access to his campaign scrapbook that contained correspondence and newspaper cuttings related to HOOH, including letters and articles from several free local newspapers. The observation involved me taking a ‘participant as observer’ role in the HOOH campaign.

In her discourse analysis of a stock transfer in Scotland, Taylor (1999, p. 125) notes how ‘the relevant corpus is potentially huge and varied’. Similar issues of scale apply in the case of the failed WDC transfer. Instead of focussing upon a single text, as Taylor did, the emphasis here is thematic in relation to how HOOH represented council housing and its tenants, and also on the rhetorical format of the anti/pro-transfer newspaper letters using Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric (Richardson, 2007, pp. 156–177). The use of newspaper articles is for contextual purposes and also to examine discursive and social practices, although one article is analysed in textual terms.

The HOOH housing campaign in context

Located in south Buckinghamshire, the local authority area covered by WDC is often considered to be an ‘affluent’ suburban and rural area. Despite this image, Wycombe has important inequality issues including a shortage of affordable housing for those people on low and even middle incomes (Watt & Stenson, 1996), in other words largely working-class people. At the time of the transfer ballot in 2000, the median house price to median earnings ratio in Wycombe was 5.87, well above the England average of 4.21 (Communities & Local Government [CLG], Live Table 577), whilst 1077 households were on the local authority housing waiting list.
The shortage of affordable housing periodically featured in the local press (‘Family’s plea for home after four-year wait: housing shortage in village’, BFP, 20 August 1999). Further belying its affluent suburban image, Wycombe District also contains several neighbourhoods with concentrated deprivation, including the council-built housing estates (Watt & Stenson, 1996). These estates are disproportionately located in and around High Wycombe, the largest town in the district and also the centre of now-declining industry, including the area’s once-renowned furniture manufacturing (Stenson & Watt, 1999). According to the 2001 Census, 10.3% of district households rented from the council.

A public meeting was organized in High Wycombe by Wycombe Trades Union Council (WTUC) during summer 1999 to debate the mooted, although not finalized, stock transfer proposal by the Conservative-run WDC (‘Unions call council house sell off meeting’, BFP, 2 July 1999). Invited DCH representatives spoke at the meeting, as well as a leading Conservative councillor. This initial meeting facilitated the coming together of WTUC members with committed council tenants: ‘the core group of [HOOH] people came from that first public meeting, […] then other people came along slightly later’ (Mike). HOOH activities subsequently revolved around a loose grouping of around 20 tenants and trade unionists who, with varying degrees of commitment, engaged in leafleting, canvassing, writing letters to the local press, lobbying WDC, attending campaign and public meetings. Attendance at the latter was pronounced given that the ‘silent south east’ region outside London is not noted for its community activism (John et al., 2002, cited in Jacobs, 2004, p. 827). The numbers attending public meetings were high during the early months of the campaign, peaking at around 60 on a rainy evening in the prosperous riverside town of Marlow: ‘dozens of angry tenants packed a public meeting to oppose the possible sell-off of council homes to a registered social landlord’ (MFP, 20 August 1999). In relation to the HOOH campaign, ‘all kinds of different, disparate elements were in it’ (Mike), politically encompassing leftists (Labour Party and Socialist Workers Party [SWP] members), a few Conservative/UKIP members, plus several non-aligned tenants and trade unionists. Wycombe Labour Party also mounted a separate anti-transfer campaign (‘Labour fights transfer of council homes’, MW, 28 September 1999), albeit one that was both relatively belated and low-key in comparison to WTUC/HOOH.

WDC held a series of public consultation meetings, as did an independent tenant adviser, and it also produced and delivered publicity material relating to the transfer. Despite its own paltry resources and occasionally fractious political and interpersonal differences, HOOH was able to mount a sustained, coordinated and ultimately effective campaign. The transfer was rejected by 191 votes in the ballot; 2994 tenants (51.6%) voted against transfer out of 5821 votes cast in a 68.7% turnout (‘Tenants vote no to transfer’, MW, 15 August 2000).

The HOOH campaign: populism, class absences and presences

A textual analysis of the HOOH campaign literature and anti-transfer newspaper letters reveals an absence of the phrase ‘working class’. Although activists occasionally referred to ‘working-class housing/tenants’ during public or campaign meetings, ‘class’ was not a prominent feature of the HOOH campaign discourse. Of more significance was a populist vocabulary, notably the phrase ‘ordinary people’ as used by an activist in the meeting following the ‘no vote’.

We won on the argument that the policies were wrong, and the result is a tribute to the common sense of the ordinary people. We like being council tenants and we will not go down the private road. (HOOH public meeting minutes, 17 August 2000)

Not only was a populist terminology used, but the speaker also asserts a positive identity for tenants – ‘we like being council tenants’. These emphases ran throughout the HOOH campaign.
texts, anti-transfer letters and at meetings, and stand in opposition to the hegemonic ‘underclass’ discourse regarding tenants. The opening sentences from the HOOH Constitution document (January 2000), which was handed out at meetings, illustrate a populist, socially inclusionary framework.

Hands Off Our Homes is a campaign supported by the Trades Union Council, council tenants, tenants associations, community and political organizations. The campaign will seek to encourage the widest possible support from all sections of the community and will oppose all forms of discrimination.

The HOOH campaign is therefore one in which council tenants are crucially constitutive, but are not the first named element in the above sentence; that position goes to the Trades Union Council, an indication of the campaign’s links to organized labour. The word ‘community’ is mentioned twice above, including how the campaign seeks support from ‘all sections of the community’. Thus council tenants are discursively located within an inclusive concept of ‘community’ of which they are a constituent rather than oblique part as in the ‘underclass’ discourse.

‘Political organizations’ are mentioned, but not described. This term therefore adds weight to the list of supporting groups, but its very vagueness ensures that exclusionary possibilities are not opened up or that the campaign is oriented towards any pre-existing group of like-minded political people. The emphasis is instead placed upon seeking ‘the widest possible support’ which HOOH was indeed able to muster.

The next sentence of the Constitution document begins to set out the aims and objectives of the campaign: ‘To defend council housing in the Wycombe District as an essential and integral part of the welfare state providing decent affordable housing for the people of Wycombe’. Thus council housing is not decoupled from the rest of the welfare state, as it is under New Labour housing policy, which sees it as problematic because of its ‘Old Labour’ connotations (Ginsburg, 2005). Instead council housing is worth ‘defending’ both because it has inherent worth (‘decent’) and is not costly (‘affordable’). However, whilst alluding to class inequality with reference to housing affordability, the HOOH Constitution does not portray council housing as being a residual tenure for a very narrow group of ‘the socially excluded’, as in the hegemonic ‘underclass’ discourse, but as something that could potentially benefit all ‘the people of Wycombe’.

This populist notion is given a strong localist inflection since ‘Wycombe’ has a dual meaning; not only is it the bureaucratic name of the administrative district, but it is also the commonly used abbreviation for the town of High Wycombe. By drawing upon a folk place vernacular, the HOOH campaign is establishing its own credentials as being organically linked to local people.

Another example comes from one of the campaign leaflets, entitled ‘Our Homes Are Not For Sale’. Here one can see a negative juxtaposition (‘not’) between a collective use value (‘our homes’) and a commercial exchange value (‘not for sale’), one that would resonate with tenants’ working-class orientation to ‘their homes’ (Allen, 2008). This theme is expanded upon by challenging the ‘claim’ from Wycombe District Council ‘that the transfer of our home to a housing company “will not be privatization”. What nonsense!’. The word ‘company’ is not only factually correct since Wycombe 2000 Housing was a ‘not-for-profit company’, but its use also implies that the transfer organization would be run along commercial lines. The latter theme is embellished.

At present council housing is run as a service accountable to elected local councilors. If transfer goes through all this will change. Already the new company is desperately seeking a Finance Director on a wedge of £80,000 comparable to the salary of the Housing Minister Nick Raynsford! You can imagine how much interest such unelected whizz kids would have in the housing needs of ordinary people.
Here high finance, with somewhat underhand connotations (‘wedge’) is contrasted to ‘local’ accountability, a localist emphasis. The contrast is then made between the ‘housing needs of ordinary people’, again a populist theme, and ‘unelected whizz kids’. The latter are ironically praised for their supposed financial acumen (‘whizz’) and also infantilized (‘kids’), but on either count they will be unable to understand ‘ordinary people’s’ ‘needs’ not least given their ‘unelected’ status. Collective use values are prioritized over impersonal exchange values, which are denigrated. This discursive juxtaposition also effectively highlights class and power inequalities (‘whizz kids on a wedge’ vs ‘ordinary people with housing needs’) without resorting to an overt class terminology.

Letters to local newspapers: the people vs the councillors

Of the 49 letters printed in the BFP and MW over the 13-month period of the campaign, 27 were anti-transfer, 19 were pro-transfer and three were unclear in their affiliation. Not only were there more anti-transfer letters, but the status of the writers was highly asymmetrical in that, with only one exception (a Labour councillor), all the anti-transfer letters were from members of the public (HOOH activists plus unspecified tenants and other local residents), whilst all the letters supporting transfer, except one, were from Conservative councillors. This asymmetry undoubtedly contributed towards the image that the HOOH campaign wanted to put across, i.e. that their campaign was populist and localist comprising local tenants and other ‘ordinary people’.

In this sense, the letters draw upon the ethotic mode of rhetorical proof in that ‘the arguer must be able to present herself as a certain type of person and the audience must believe that they are this certain type of person’ (Richardson, 2007, p. 160, original emphases). As Richardson (p. 177) goes onto say, arguers reliant upon an ethotic mode of proof state that ‘they have expertise, firsthand experience of the issue, or imply that they are trustworthy’. In the case of the anti-transfer letters, the ethotic mode of persuasion included all three elements. However, the expertise was not based upon anyone claiming an ‘official’ expert position via an institutional affiliation, but was instead that of HOOH activists and other letter writers presenting information regarding the relative status of RSLs and council landlords, WDC finances, etc., and also asking searching questions (‘Informed tenant asks questions’, BFP, 10 December 1999). This ‘unofficial’ expertise was bolstered by firsthand experience and trust based upon being tenants and/or concerned members of the public.

The above quantitative asymmetry in relation to the status of the letter writers was commented upon in one of the anti-transfer letters.

I have tried to keep abreast of most of the letters in the Bucks Free Press and Star. One thing is quite apparent – all the letters in favour are written by councillors or the council. Most of the letters against have been written by a couple of councillors but mainly by ordinary members of the public. Draw your own conclusions. It appears the only people in favour are some councillors. (ET, BFP, 4 August 2000)

In asking BFP readers to ‘draw your own conclusions’, ET is implicitly suggesting that ‘ordinary members of the public’ can be trusted, whereas councillors cannot. In this, ET is drawing upon the long-standing working-class ‘them and us’ attitudes, as discussed above, in which ‘them’, those people in authority (in this case councillors), are regarded with suspicion. This binary ‘them and us’ class divide is subtly signified by ET earlier on in the letter when he simply points out how the transfer ballot is being held in late-July/early-August, a period that is of considerable significance for ‘Wycombe locals’, including tenants.

We are now in what was called the ‘factory fortnight’ when most companies in the High Wycombe area shut down for this period. People will obviously be very tied up with packing for the holiday and last-minute pressure at work. (ET, BFP, 4 August 2000)
Without being explicit, ET is alluding to three things: firstly High Wycombe’s industrial heritage, something many council tenants and other BFP readers would positively identity with; secondly his own credibility as a person with intimate knowledge of local working-class life-worlds; and thirdly the council’s insensitivity in holding the ballot at such an inappropriate time. ET’s astute message is that ‘if WDC councillors can be so insensitive to local tenants’ needs in the timing of the ballot, how can “we” tenants possibly trust “them” in relation to the letters they write in favour of transfer?’ Almost as if to confirm ET’s point regarding the asymmetrical identity of letter writers, another two letters appeared on the same page regarding transfer (BFP, 4 August 2000), one by a HOOH activist who could write about ‘we’ tenants on the basis of his firsthand experience of being a High Wycombe council tenant, and another by a Conservative councillor who wrote ‘I believe that the case for transfer is overwhelming’ (emphasis added), a belief based upon ‘official’ (hence dubious) expertise.

Epiideictic rhetoric is concerned with the qualities of the arguer, for example whether or not the person is honourable or dishonourable (Richardson, 2007, p. 157). Occasional invective, in the form of accusations of dishonour directed against the anti-transfer campaigners, can be identified in the councillors’ letters and even in some council transfer material (‘Opposition scare-mongering’ sub-heading in ‘Say Yes to the Facts on Transfer’ WDC leaflet). This mode of argument was also present in the anti-transfer letters and HOOH material but was generally subtler and less personalized, as seen in ET’s letter above. In addition to suggestions that HOOH provided misleading information, the councillors’ invective tended to take the form of suggesting that the anti-transfer campaign consisted of people who in one way or another were ‘illegitimate’ representatives of Wycombe District council tenants (because they were not council tenants and/or locals, and/or were political radicals), as in this letter by a Conservative councillor following the initial WTUC public meeting.

which purported to be a council tenants’ meeting, was nothing short of an outrage against local democracy. Its domination by members of the Socialist Workers Party from the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Hackney destroyed any vestige of legitimacy that it might have otherwise had. Those genuine Wycombe District Council tenants who attended this meeting heard its organisers and their Trotskyite ‘guests’ peddle a series of half-truths and inaccuracies which would have done nothing for the peace of mind of our tenants but, presumably, was intended to further the organisers’ own political agenda. (Cllr AF, WDC, BFP, August 6, 1999)

Thus radical outsiders from London, who it is implied were not council tenants, were peddling ‘half-truths and inaccuracies’ to ‘our tenants’. The latter phrase both connotes a local dimension, i.e. WDC tenants, but also, unfortunately for the councillor, a form of paternalistic relationship that has historically marked council landlord/tenant relations in many parts of the country.

Two weeks later, a letter appeared in the BFP (August 20, 1999) by a Marlow council tenant who challenged the councillor’s account of the meeting and also offered a detailed argument opposing transfer. In the following week’s BFP, four letters appeared all of which opposed transfer. Two letters were from SWP members (one from High Wycombe and one from a nearby town but outside Wycombe District), which could be seen as supporting the councillor’s exclusionary invective. However, another letter was by a High Wycombe council tenant and the fourth was from a Wycombe trade union activist who was also involved in HOOH. The five letters against transfer therefore indicate that the constituency of concerned people was much broader than the councillor implied and importantly contained local residents, including tenants. The trade union/HOOH activist made his own housing and political statuses explicit in a manner that attempted to demonstrate his own trustworthiness as well as challenge the councillors’ exclusionary agenda.

In view of Cllr. F’s opening attack, I’d better say that I am not a council tenant, I am not a member of any political party, but I do represent my trade union on Wycombe Trades Council. I am also very
By referring to the councillor’s ‘attack’, this writer is distancing himself from that form of invective. Instead he is open about where his affiliations lie, but he is writing as a concerned citizen about aspects of government policy. Such concerns are expressed in a low-key manner that implicitly challenges the councillor’s diatribe (‘outrage against local democracy’), a point that DD tackles directly later on.

In fact the majority of people who spoke at the meeting were quite obviously local council tenants who contributed much more positively to the debate and I did not hear of anybody sharing Cllr. F’s opinion. As with all issues of concern, it will bring together people from all kinds of backgrounds and rather than attack those perceived backgrounds, Cllr. F should deal with the issue. (ibid.)

It is the council tenants who are debating in a ‘positive’ manner, unlike the councillor who ‘attacks’ his opponents. Furthermore, such issues are not confined to ‘our tenants’, as in the councillor’s letter, but are instead open to debate by ‘people from all kinds of backgrounds’. Here the populist inclusive HOOH campaign message is highlighted, that this is something that all people should be involved in debating. Later DD again mentions not being a council tenant, but in a manner that enlarges the constituency of concerned citizens.

As I said, I am not a council tenant but I don’t think that precludes me, or anyone else, from the debate or from being concerned about the issue. I have children who will probably find it very difficult to afford to live in the area they have grown up in and I would like to think that the option of affordable council housing would be there for them if they needed it. I have yet to be convinced that this will be the case when housing associations have been in control for a few years. (ibid.)

Here one can see the ethotic mode of persuasion via the reference to firsthand experience in that the writer has children living in the area who might in the future need ‘affordable council housing’. This ‘legacy for future generations’ (see McCormack, 2008, p. 11) argument featured strongly at HOOH public meetings and would also resonate with BFP readers given the way that the paper itself covered affordable housing shortages. The letter by DD therefore establishes the populist and localist nature of the anti-transfer lobby as comprising all local residents who are acting for the good of future generations. However, this populism/localism also contains a subliminal class message since by definition those who are most likely to be concerned about the issue of affordable housing shortages are those on low–middle incomes rather than those on high incomes, i.e. predominantly working-class rather than middle-class people. As with the HOOH campaign literature discussed above, class inequality is signified without being directly named.

The perils of professionalism in asymmetrical discursive and social practices

So far I have concentrated on textual analysis in relation to the tri-partite CDA framework devised by Fairclough (1995), with discursive and social practices as secondary. In this section the focus shifts to the latter two practices, including a consideration of the relative resources HOOH and WDC were able to draw upon, an important consideration for CDA. Such resources, which structured the social processes of text production and distribution, were massively unequal. WDC produced various professional-looking documents for tenants on the transfer proposal, including a three-booklet colour consultation pack and video. Not only could WDC produce its texts to a high professional standard, but it was also capable of distributing them to its 7000-plus tenant households, a process that was made easier by the fact that it knew precisely where its tenants lived (‘Promise on housing transfer’, BFP, 9 June 2000). The costs of the WDC consultation exercise (or ‘hard sell’ in HOOH language) are unknown by the author. One HOOH leaflet claimed WDC had spent £400,000, whilst a letter by a Wycombe District resident suggested a figure of £183,000 (HG, The Star, 31 August 2000).
By contrast, HOOH was financially dependent upon individual and trade union donations plus collections at public meetings. On the basis of HOOH’s financial statements, and confirmed by Mike, its campaign income was approximately £1000. The leaflets and newsletters were basic PC-produced black-and-white documents which were then photocopied. In relation to resources, although most HOOH tenant activists were not in paid employment, the trade unionists were. Some of the latter had access to photocopiers at their workplaces and were able to copy the leaflets on an ad hoc basis, a practice which could have resulted in employer censure had they been found out. In accordance with resource mobilization theory in social movement analysis (Crossley, 2002), it was only because the deprived council tenants could draw upon the support of the better-resourced trade unionists within the overarching HOOH umbrella that the leaflets were produced in anything like the requisite numbers. The dedicated anti-transfer newspaper letter writing undertaken by HOOH activists and other residents partially offset the massive resource imbalance between HOOH and WDC in relation to the production of and distribution of texts. Another important resource, according to Mike, was HOOH’s ability to access the existing expertise of the national DCH campaign, which included the latter contributing speakers at HOOH meetings as well as providing a conduit for housing information.

In contrast to WDC with its formidable distribution capacity, HOOH had to rely upon its activists and other sympathetic tenants for leafleting and canvassing. In addition to being handed out at meetings, nearly all tenants’ homes had at least one HOOH leaflet delivered according to Mike. Nevertheless, as Mike admitted, the leafletting and canvassing processes were neither easy nor comprehensive, especially since, unlike WDC, HOOH did not possess a definitive list of council tenants’ addresses.

In relation to text production and consumption, the professionalism of the WDC campaign in its later stages disheartened the HOOH campaigners. One HOOH campaign meeting at which I was present centred upon a viewing of the council’s transfer video. This caused considerable disquiet amongst the assembled activists because it was a very well-produced text, far in excess of anything HOOH could hope to create (cf. Taylor, 1999). As one activist later admitted in a newspaper story, ‘I secretly thought it would be a yes vote because the council has spent various amounts on this project and has a very clever and sophisticated video’ (‘Tenants vote no to transfer’, MW, 15 August 2000).

Nevertheless, there are also indications that the asymmetrical David vs Goliath nature of the discursive and social practices, between the ‘amateurish’ HOOH and the ‘professional’ WDC, operated in the former’s favour. For example, HOOH’s reliance upon networks of local people for leaflet distribution facilitated a human-interest story in the local press, the type of story that forms the latter’s staple diet. In a Midweek article on the transfer (‘Council promise is “window dressing”’, 4 July 2000) was a photograph with the sub-heading ‘L ... [aged] 8, joins campaign trail’. In the photo’s foreground, a young girl is holding a leaflet with the words ‘Hands Off Our Homes’ in the centre, surrounded by ‘Defend Council Housing – say no to privatisation’, whilst in the background is a block of council flats. The story begins, ‘Youngster [L] is helping her grandfather [C] in the Hands Off Our Homes campaign’, and it goes onto say how the girl had handed out HOOH badges and stickers. This representation of how generations of council tenants were united in a common cause is an extremely powerful and positive image, one that is moreover in direct opposition to the ‘underclass’ discourse of tenants’ social exclusion and political apathy. This image was even repeated since the paper included the same photograph in its post-ballot story (‘Tenants vote no to transfer’, MW, 15 August 2000). In terms of social practices, the high-profile local presence of the HOOH campaign facilitated the opening up of a discursive space for an alternative positive newspaper representation of council tenants, as in this ‘good news’ story.
Furthermore in relation to text consumption, several anti-transfer newspaper letters suggest that WDC’s ‘professionalism’, and thereby its reliance upon an ‘official’ expertise-based mode of ethotic persuasion, was counter-productive. One letter writer described a meeting organized by the council.

This meeting was very professionally presented by experts in this field who painted the most rosiest and wonderful picture of the housing transfer. There were no ‘anti sell-off’ speakers. Anyone sitting on the fence would have been completely won over. This only adds to my already cynical view of a sell-off to a so-called non-profit-making organisation. I just don’t think the public are gullible enough to fall for this one. (MT, BFP, 22 October 1999)

Instead of persuasion, WDC’s professionalism resulted in cynicism. Similar sentiments were expressed in letters, as well as at HOOH meetings, that disparagingly referred to WDC’s ‘glossy’ transfer material, a term that connotes both unnecessary expense and artificiality.

WDC are spending untold amounts of our money to get this ‘deal’ through fast, i.e. videos, glossy magazines and other rubbish. This money could be used for better purpose. (CS, MW, 25 July 2000)

There are strong similarities with Taylor’s (1999, p. 134) discourse analysis of a stock transfer video in that the tenants she interviewed ‘readily identified the material as the advertising genre: they also knew that they did not trust what they heard/saw as “too idyllic”’ (emphasis added). HOOH activists were able to both reflect and reinforce tenants’ suspicions regarding WDC’s transfer material, for example by ironically referring to ‘the hard sell (sorry consultation) on the transfer’ (PB, The South Bucks Leader, 13 July 2000). In turn this reinforced HOOH’s anti-transfer message, a message rhetorically rooted in its activists’ firsthand experience and closer connection to tenants’ concerns that something must be wrong with the proposed transfer: ‘they [ordinary voters] obviously voted “no” because they felt that it was wrong in principle’ (ET, BFP, 15 September 2000).

Conclusion

In contrast to the hegemonic ‘underclass’ discourse regarding council tenants, this paper has identified a counter-hegemonic ‘ordinary people’ discourse in relation to the HOOH campaign. HOOH used this discourse in their literature, but it was bolstered via the ethotic rhetorical structure of letters which took a ‘people vs councillors’ format. HOOH was hugely under-resourced relative to WDC’s text production and distribution capabilities. Nevertheless, the latter’s ‘professionalism’ reinforced the impression that it was engaged in a ‘glossy’ marketing exercise, one that was counter-productive in terms of tenants’ text consumption. HOOH, on the other hand, was able to demonstrate an intimate connection to tenants’ concerns and needs regarding ‘their homes’, concerns rooted in a working-class life-world and habitus (Allen, 2008).

What do the research findings tell us about social activism in relation to New Labour’s neoliberal housing and regeneration policies? The HOOH campaign emerged out of a coming together of trade unionists with council tenants at the initial WTUC meeting in High Wycombe. In general, HOOH was most active in the urban areas of Wycombe District, notably High Wycombe, and it drew most of its support from such areas. However, despite its localist emphasis and roots in local social networks, HOOH was not solely a ‘local campaign’ since it made links with the national DCH campaign. Several HOOH activists were Labour Party members and they, alongside the Wycombe Labour Party, were opposing a policy that the New Labour government advocates; this policy is also heavily contested within the national Labour Party and amongst trade unions (Ginsburg, 2005; Defend Council Housing, 2006). Neoliberalism in general, and the ‘modernization’ (i.e. marketization) of public services under New Labour in particular, brings forth forces of contestation such as HOOH, despite the ideology of
inevitability (Leitner et al., 2007). In order to capture the contested and inherently political nature of urban/housing policy making and implementation, it is incumbent upon CDA practitioners to consider the texts and discursive practices of those people who question the policy frameworks that neoliberal governments try to impose.

In relation to class politics and language, overt appeals to ‘working-class’ identity/interests were muted in the HOOH campaign. Had they not been, it is undoubtedly the case that the campaign would have alienated the right-wing and non-aligned HOOH activists, as Mike admitted. The HOOH campaign therefore has parallels with the contract cleaners’ wage campaign in London in that ‘the successful prosecution of class politics is not necessarily dependent upon narrowly defined class identity’ (Wills, 2008, p. 306). Nevertheless, a subliminal theme of class inequality was present in HOOH texts and talk. The language of the HOOH campaign also resonated with the long-standing ‘them and us’ attitude that remains characteristic of the urban working-class habitus (Allen, 2008). Finally, if being ‘ordinary’ is for many people, including the middle classes, a valorized social identity as Savage (2000) suggests, then the capacity of the HOOH campaign to re-present tenants as ‘ordinary people’ is an inherently political and empowering act, as reflected in this post-ballot letter: ‘we the tenants must run this show from now on’ (CS, BFP, 26 August 2000). This type of empowerment is especially significant for council tenants given the hegemonic ‘underclass’ discourse that objectifies them as abnormal ‘others’ lying outside the national citizenry.

Acknowledgements
Thanks to Chris Allen, Paul Burnham, Shirley Koster, John McCormack, Gareth Millington and the two guest editors for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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Notes
1. Labour councillors and a Labour MP were speakers at HOOH meetings.
2. ‘ET’ indicates the letter writer’s initials.

References


