

TOWARDS AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSES OF SEGREGATION. PROPOSALS FOR THE CASE OF ROMANIAN NEWS MEDIA

By Hanna Orsolya Vincze

Sites of segregation are complex, spatial, social, historical and discursive constructs. Today, it is primarily the mass media, and in Romania especially the news media, where the discursive construction of segregation is played out. By the discursive construction of segregation we mean two, linked phenomena:

- a) the way mass media represents specific groups defined along social or ethnic criteria as socially, medically, residentially, criminally or otherwise deviant, and
- b) how these representations influence social attitudes and public policies ultimately resulting in segregation, intended or unintended.

The analysis of public discourses of segregation will therefore focus on the analysis of Romanian news media. Such an analysis is in itself appropriate to understanding media discourses, the main agents, topics, voices, areas of life where or whereby specific groups are (represented as) segregated. The approach has its inherent limitations: analyses of media content, verbal and visual, cannot in themselves fully explain how media discourses affect policies and public agendas or indeed researches commissioned. However, they can help us understand the main public concerns raised by the groups represented, by the logic of their representation itself, the social, cultural and historical complexities involved, and the agendas promoted. Ultimately, they may provide a better understanding of the structure of the Romanian public sphere, the discursive construction of public and privatized spaces, of the role of social issues in public and political debates, of the manner in which “the rise of the social” can be interpreted in a society with a newly transformed public sphere.

Methodologically, the analysis will proceed at two levels.

1. Public discourses as played out in the media will be analyzed using classical agenda setting as well as qualitative and quantitative content analysis techniques, covering both verbal and visual representations.

This stage will allow us to identify the main topics or superthemes around which discourses of segregation revolve. Although developed in audience research to signify the constructs using which viewer interpret complex news stories, which mediate between a seemingly distant reality and their own life-world (JENSEN 1998:19), the concept of superthemes will help us grasp the processes by which the media itself mediates the experience of specific groups.

The content analysis will also highlight the relative prominence of specific groups in such discourses, the voices that articulate their experience, the agents that are called upon or are given a possibility to inform the public (experts, researchers, policy-makers, activist groups – their relative prominence again being significant), the media genres and columns favored (the location of the stories in the structure of the news), or the areas of life in which these concerns are placed by the media (social,

political, economic, criminal etc.) The analysis will proceed by first identifying the corpus of sources, then by a preliminary coding of a sample material, and then the comprehensive analysis.

2. The second level of analysis will focus on the languages serving as frames of reference and interpretation for the topics, topoi, agents, areas of life etc. identified as of central importance. The approach will be novel in that by frames we shall not refer to cognitive frames of interpretation, but to the way discourse is structured, the frames of reference employed to create meaning (for similar approaches in the multifaceted frame analyses see REESE 2001; for an attempt to differentiate agenda-setting and framing as separate levels of analysis see WEAVER 2007).

Such widely understood discursive structures and frames of reference are expected to include:

- moral panics (for an application of Stanley Cohen's term to the more recent media landscape cf. McROBBIE – THORNTON 1995, previously also HALL 1978.),
- the "culture of fear" (the term is borrowed from FUREDI 2002; although there it is used to analyze the „scare-stories" related to technology-induced health and safety risks, the approach will be used to understand and interpret the framing of perceived threats to the fabric of society, especially in analyzing media content, where the discourse of fear has become a widely successful news format),
- constructions of otherness using asymmetric counterconcepts (the approach of KOSELLECK [1985] to analyzing the way language is used to deny the legitimacy and the right to share the same space of certain groups is especially pertinent to studies of discursive segregation),
- the language of violence (SPARKS 1992 discusses the relationship between stories of violence and "the public dramas of crime and law enforcement" and social and political agendas; although he discusses these stories as fictional narratives, violence is also a major language of the news, contributing to the criminalization whole groups, ways of life or types of behavior.)
- local meanings and disclaimers (cf. VAN DIJK 2000 on how specific code-words and disclaimers of any negative attitudes are used in news media to ascribe specific roles like responsible agents, targets or victims.)

Apart from the above theoretical and methodological framework, the discourse analysis will also need to be informed by the intellectual history of ghettoisation and segregation. Studies highly relevant to the issue include urban studies of the modern industrial city and its representations, of the way inequalities get woven into the urban fabric, and the way public discourses may contribute to the privatization of public space and residential segregation (cf. SENNETT 1990, KING 1996).

Bibliography

- Füredi, F. (2002). *Culture of Fear: risk-taking and the morality of low expectation*. Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Hall, Stuart. (1978). "Violence and the Media." *Violence*. Ed. Norman Tutt. London: HMSO, 1978. 221-37.
- Jensen, Klaus. (1998). *News of the World: World Cultures Look at Television News*. Routledge.
- King, Anthony D., ed. (1996) *Re-presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital, and Culture in the Twenty-first-Century Metropolis*. New York: New York University Press.
- Koselleck, R. (1985). *Futures Past: On the semantics of historical time*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- McCombs, M. (2005). A Look at Agenda-setting: past, present and future. *Journalism Studies*, 6(4), 543-557.
- McRobbie, A., & Thornton, S. L. (1995). Rethinking 'Moral Panic' for Multi-Mediated Social Worlds. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 46(4), 559-574.
- Reese, Stephen D.; Gandy, Oscar H. Jr.; Grant, August E., ed. (2001). *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World. Communication Theory*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sennett, Richard. (1990). *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*. New York: Knopf.
- Sparks, Richard. (1992). *Television and the Drama of Crime: Moral Tales and the Place of Crime in Public Life*. Philadelphia: Open UP.
- Van Dijk, Teun (2000). New(s) Racism: A discourse analytical approach. In Simon Cottle (Ed.), *Ethnic Minorities and the Media*. (pp. 33-49). Buckingham, UK & Philadelphia, USA: Open University Press, 2000.
- Weaver, D. H. (2007). Thoughts on Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 142-147.