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For almost thirty years scholars active in the fields of critical discourse analysis, argumentation theory¹ and multimodality have been working intensively to develop theories and tools for the analysis of relevant phenomena within their own field. To this end, they have made systematic or occasional use of insights and ideas from other related fields of research. But the increasing realization that discourse and communication phenomena are more complex, in terms of both their semiotic properties and their societal implications, has inevitably led to more fruitful collaborations among scholars and to promising cross-fertilizations across the three communities in recent times. The author of this monograph is a rather rare case of someone who not only has co-authored papers with several scholars from all three fields mentioned above but also has the knowledge needed in order to discover interesting points of contact among these fields. The monograph under review is an excellent example of Serafis’ synergistic mindset and of his critical gaze on the literature and the social phenomena he studies. In it, he draws on literature from the fields of critical discourse studies, argumentation theory and multimodal analysis to propose novel combinations of tools and concepts for the study of the legitimation of authoritarianism by print media in three different but related moments of social, financial, and humanitarian crisis that monopolized the Greek public sphere from 2008 till 2020.

More specifically, Serafis studies the front pages of four mainstream Greek newspapers with a right-wing (Kathimerini), centrist (To Vima and Ta Nea) and center-left (Ethnos) orientation reporting on the social unrest that followed the killing of a 15-year-old student by a police officer in December 2008, the referendum for accepting or rejecting the conditions for the bailout program proposed by the so-called troika in June 2015, and two moments of the so-called refugee crisis from 2016 and 2020. As he explains, these three cases were selected because they exemplify related crises that other European countries faced, and because they make it possible to illustrate the different but related forms of authoritarian-

¹ In the case of argumentation theory, scholarly research in modern times admittedly goes back at least to the seventies if not earlier (see van Eemeren et al. 2014).
ism that is legitimized multimodally through mainstream media discourses. The choice of data from Greece is justified not only because the author is a native speaker of the language and familiar with the specific context but also by the fact that the Greek case is a good illustration of a continuing European tendency towards more state control, especially in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and the series of other crises that the Greek society faced in the decade under study. Serafis’ goal, as he puts it, is to propose “a critical discursive-argumentative micro-analytical framework that will enable scholars focusing on Crisis Communication and working in the fields of (Critical) Discourse Studies, Multimodality and Argumentation Studies to scrutinize the discursive construction ... and ... the argumentative justification of authoritarianism on newspaper front pages” (p. 4).

The book is divided in two parts, the first presenting the theoretical background concerning authoritarianism and the author’s methodological proposal that integrates critical discourse analysis with argumentation theory and multimodality, and the second presenting the three cases studies. The two parts are preceded by an introduction and followed by a concluding chapter.

The first chapter of the theoretical part draws on the concept of authoritarian statism coined by Nicos Poulantzas and on Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in order to explain how the media help to disseminate and naturalize authoritarian tendencies in the public sphere. Crises, understood as moments of transition constructed discursively by media or political actors and characterized by high polarization and fluidity, provide both a challenge and an opportunity for the state to (re)stabilize the status quo by promoting imaginaries that will eventually help to preserve its dominance. The media, together with other ideological state apparatuses, function as articulators of hegemony (intellectuals) who play a crucial role in legitimizing the dominant ideology and the restrictive policies of the state especially during moments of crisis. Starting from this perspective, Serafis argues that the front page of printed newspapers constitutes a genre that can play such a role not only by discursively representing crisis moments but also by implicitly justifying the authoritarian ideologies that underlie the proposed actions for dealing with them.

In the second chapter of the theoretical part, Serafis presents his methodological proposal for the micro-level study of the discursive representation of crises and the justification of authoritarianism tendencies in front pages. He proposes namely a synergy between (multimodal) critical discourse analysis and argumentation theory in order to account both for the multimodal nature of the front page and for the argumentative inferences underlying the positions expressed in it. The various steps of the analysis seek to reveal the contextual and logical premises which can be recovered from the text, the image, or the combination thereof as well as the context, and which can be said to ground a standpoint that asks for an
action to be taken regarding the specific crisis. In this way, the implicit argumentative character of the front page is made explicit, and the standpoints advanced by the different newspapers can be compared with each other and shown to be part of a network of arguments that circulate in the public sphere regarding the specific crisis.

More specifically, for the study of the semiotic properties of the front page, Serafis has recourse to the tools and categories of systemic functional grammar as they have been applied to the analysis of verbal and multimodal discourse by scholars such as Theo van Leeuwen (2008) and David Machin (see Ledin and Machin 2020), among others working within social semiotics. He thus focuses on the choice of words in the headlines and on the content of the photos as well as on questions concerning the use of symbols, colors, and the overall composition, which can provide a basis for recovering argumentative inferences. To identify which argumentative inferences can be recovered and how they connect to sustain a certain standpoint, Serafis has recourse to the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT) developed by Edo Rigotti and Sara Greco (2019). According to this model, the inferential configuration of an argument consists of two components, namely the topical premises that constitute the so-called procedural-inferential component, and the endoxical premises that constitute the so-called material-contextual component, which allow the analyst to recover both the logical and the contextual inferences that can be said to lead to a certain standpoint. Furthermore, in order to show how the different standpoints reconstructed from the different newspapers constitute a network of arguments that end up pointing to the same direction, even though they are advanced by different parties, Serafis combines Marcin Lewinski and Mark Aakhus’ (2014) perspective on argumentative polylogues with Dima Mohammed’s (2019) concept of standing standpoint.

The second part of the book, which is the longest, comprises three chapters, one for each of the three case studies. Here the author applies in a very systematic way the various steps of the method he presented in the previous chapter and demonstrates his skill of offering complex interpretations of the front pages by placing them in the broader socio-political context at the time of their circulation. In addition, each chapter places specific emphasis on a different dimension of the analysis. Thus, the chapter that analyzes six front pages (from Kathimerini and Ta Nea) about the December 2008 riots focuses on the representation of actors and actions, the chapter that analyzes seven front pages (from Ta Nea, Ethnos, and Kathimerini) about the 2015 referendum focuses on the semiotization of emotions, while the chapter that analyzes seven front pages (from Kathimerini, To Vima, and Ta Nea) about the refugee crisis in 2016 and 2020 focuses on the visual framing. At the beginning of each chapter, the author provides background information, which is necessary for understanding the socio-political context in which
these front pages appeared, and on which he draws later in order to justify some of his own interpretations. After presenting some basic distinctions concerning the analytical focus of the respective chapter, Serafis delves into the close analysis of the front pages under study, starting by the headline, moving to the photo and the interplay between the two. He then uses the meanings extracted from the semiotic analysis in order to propose an argumentative reconstruction of the inferences following the AMT. Each chapter ends with a section where the author brings together the standpoints reconstructed based on the analysis of the front pages of the different newspapers to show what the overarching standing standpoint is.

It is worth mentioning here that the reconstruction of the standpoint and the argumentative inferences that sustain it does not concern the single front page but results from the comparative discussion of two front pages published by the same newspaper on different dates. Based on the reconstructed standpoints from the newspapers reporting on the 2008 December riots, Serafis concludes that the standing standpoint to which all six converge is: “We (Greece) need a solid intervention by state institutions (government/police) to suppress the protests of December 2008” (p. 90). The standing standpoint to which the seven front pages reporting on the 2015 referendum converge is: “We (Greeks) should oppose the Greek government by voting ‘Yes’ and thus implementing austerity measures as a way towards a better integration in the Eurozone” (p. 120), while the standing standpoint to which the six front pages reporting on the refugee crisis converge is: “The Greek state should prevent migrants’ mobilization and effectively address the key problems emerging on Greek territory (economy, national security, pandemic)” (p. 147).

From the above overview of the book’s contents, it becomes clear that Serafis draws from a variety of authors and proposes an eclectic combination of concepts in order to address the ambitious task that he has set out for himself, namely, to convince critical discourse analysts that an account of argumentativity should be an integral part of the critical discourse analysis of multimodal communication. In this endeavor, he ends up presenting a number of ideas that inevitably speak to multiple audiences including scholars in argumentation studies and multimodal analysis, to name the two most obvious. Whether colleagues from the critical discourse analysis community will be convinced of Serafis’ arguments

2. In four cases, Serafis deviates from this principle, without however providing an explanation for this, when he presents two separate AMT reconstructions for the two front pages of Ethnos (Figures 5.11a, 5.11b and 5.12) and a separate reconstruction for a single front page of Kathimerini (Figure 6.8), as well as when he presents a reconstruction of the standpoint after having compared two different newspapers, Kathimerini and To Vima (Figure 6.6), and Ta Nea and To Vima (Figure 6.11).
remains to be seen when the book is reviewed in a relevant journal. For the community of argumentation scholars, the book is definitely a welcome contribution because it shows how concepts such as argumentative polylogue, standing standpoint, topoi and endoxa can be of use in the critical scrutiny of ideological practices and authoritarian tendencies. Most importantly, however, the book makes a substantial contribution to the field of argumentation studies by proposing a method for recovering meanings from the multimodal text that can play a role in the argumentative inferences that lead to standpoints, and by applying it systematically in order to reveal the inherent argumentativity of the newspaper front pages. As such, the book makes a good case about how the AMT, in particular, can be applied to the analysis of multimodal argumentation, elaborating on ideas published so far in articles by the author himself and by other colleagues working with that model (see, for example, Pollaroli and Rocci 2015; Serafis et al. 2020).

In the remainder, I would like to raise a couple of critical comments I had when reading the three analysis chapters. My first comment concerns the extent to which the author’s critical and engaged stance towards the three crisis moments and their socio-political context has influenced not only the selection of the front pages to be analyzed but also the interpretation of what is observed on their semiotic surface, and how that triggers certain argumentative inferences. Regarding the selection of the front pages, the discussion of the 2015 referendum, for example, would have been more complete if front pages were also included from newspapers that were part of the mainstream press but were also supportive of the policies of the SYRIZA-ANEL government, thereby endorsing the no-vote. Such a choice would have probably shown that the convergence of standpoints in the mainstream press was not as straightforward as it is assumed to be in the current analysis. It would have thus been interesting to see on which starting points concerning Europe the newspapers that supported the yes-vote agreed with the left-leaning newspapers, and how the latter tried to balance their position between supporting the no-vote to the austerity measures proposed by the EU officials, on the one hand, and subscribing to the European values, on the other hand.

Regarding the selective focus on the semiotic choices concerning the various news items appearing on the front page, elements that have now been overlooked could have either enriched the author’s own interpretation in some cases or suggested an alternative one in some others.

As an example of the first case, the author overlooks the fact that almost all other stories that surround the main headline and photo on the front page of Kathimerini on July 4–5, 2015 (Figure 5.7) either point to concrete negative consequences in case the no-vote wins or to divergent opinions among the government’s own members, which taken together with the main headline and the photo that the author discusses would have provided further support to his proposed
interpretation. The datum could thus be more broadly formulated as “A yes-vote equals democracy, security, liberty in Europe, while a no-vote means troubles for the salaries and pensions, for the bank savings, and for the provision of medicines, among others”. So, while the photo and the main headline seem to focus on the gain from the yes-vote, the rest of the front-page stories are using a loss-frame, contrary to what the author writes on p.110 about the constructed emotions revolving around hope.

As an example of the second case, the author overlooks the photos and headlines that appear at the bottom of the front pages of Ta Nea on December 9 and 10, 2008 (Figures 4.4 and 4.5), which report respectively on the student demonstrations in memory of the murdered student and on his funeral. One could thus say that unlike Kathimerini, Ta Nea does present the broader context in which the reported riots occurred, something which is not adequately acknowledged in the author’s interpretation when he writes that “Thus, the point made by Ta Nea is the inability of the state in front of the December riots – similar to the one made by Kathimerini” (p.80). Another example is the discussion of the front page of Kathimerini on March 28, 2016 (Figure 6.1), where the author takes the story about clashes in a refugee camp at the port of Piraeus, which features with a headline and a photo below the story about the additional taxes for the middle class, to be related with the latter, even if the two parts are actually segregated since there is a dotted line separating one story from the other.

This leads me to the next comment concerning the concept of standing standpoint and its operationalization in the analysis. The concept appears to be useful in capturing the flow of opinions shared openly or implicitly in the public sphere and thereby in showing certain alignments of positions which can be a sign of an attempt to legitimize authoritarianism, when they can be shown to be advanced by actors with apparently different ideological backgrounds. As I understand it, the standing standpoint is an implicit standpoint to which different stakeholders could be committed based on a standpoint that they have explicitly put forward at a given moment or on their explicit reaction to someone else’s standpoint. On pages 120 and 147, however, the author uses formulations that suggest that the standing standpoint has the same status as the common ground and starting points that the newspapers share despite their ideological and editorial differences. If that is the case, then in what sense can it be called a standpoint, since starting points are assumed to be accepted anyway? The author’s interest in incorporating this concept to his analytical framework has exposed the need for an operationalization of it that allows one to systematically identify standing standpoints and trace their circulation in the public sphere. On p.50, he writes “the claim revolving around the establishment of an authoritarian state able to suppress the December 2008 protests …, is sustained, years later, within the context of
the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ …, by different semiotic means and different newspapers.” This is indeed a very interesting observation, but it seems to be grounded on the author’s own assumption that the two discourses are a realization of authoritarian discourse, not on some pragmatic or semantic analysis of the contents of these standpoints or on some contrastive analysis of standpoints reconstructed from a larger corpus of front pages covering the same story during that period. As a matter of fact, one would have expected to see a more nuanced representation of the standing standpoints to which the network of the standpoints gave rise in the public sphere during these crisis moments, instead of reading that the mainstream media converged to basically one, which may not necessarily do justice to the whole story, as my comments about the selection of front pages and semiotic resources above suggest.

My final comment concerns the identification of the locus and the role it plays in guiding the interpretation and reconstruction process following the AMT. As Serafis writes “the analysis of representational meaning(s) provides insights regarding the locus/loci that govern(s) the inference in each particular case as well as the datum that is related to the dominant endoxon/endoxa in real-life contexts of argumentation” (p. 62). In the actual analyses, however, it is not clear how the meanings recovered from the semiotics of the front page help to identify the locus. The latter seems to be recovered entirely from the reasoning that connects the first with the final conclusion. It is instead the reconstruction of the datum and the relevant endoxon that is informed by the semiotic analysis. Moreover, it is not clear whether the components of the AMT have primarily a heuristic or a justificatory function. By that I mean whether the analyst uses the distinctions among the various categories under each inferential component to search for semiotic meanings that can fill in the different slots of the inference process or uses these distinctions to justify retrospectively his interpretation of the multimodal text. In either case, it needs to be made clear in which order the various components of the inference process are to be filled in, something which relates to the question whether these steps present the inference process that the receiver follows when interpreting the multimodal text or the inference process that the analyst follows when reconstructing it. Now that in almost all cases a locus of termination and setting up is found to guide the argumentative inference that underlies the standpoint put forward in the front pages, one wonders whether this is because of the author’s own expectations about authoritarian discourse or because of what is actually communicated in each case.

Despite the disagreements about the proposed interpretations, one thing is certain: Serafis has given us a framework which makes explicit the steps for reconstructing a standpoint-argument pair from multimodal texts and which can be applied in a systematic way to the analysis of front pages. Without this step, any
discussion about the merits of this particular proposal or about the ways of sharpening our methodological tools for the reconstruction of multimodal argumentation in general would not have been possible. This is an important contribution to the study of multimodal argumentation.

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