WorkChoices and Word Choices

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Abstract

Despite some formative early work on the representation of industrial relations in the media, discursive approaches have not been widely used in industrial relations research. In this paper, we demonstrate that discursive approaches can provide alternative bases for critique and thus have the potential to enrich our understanding of contemporary debates and trends in industrial relations. To this end, we have applied a critical discourse approach to our analysis of two newspaper advertisements run by the Howard Government in October 2005, to promote their industrial relations changes. We find that key words are emptied of their traditional meaning and show how the advertisements discursively promote a gender-neutral and depoliticised version of work, replacing notions of collective social rights with those based on consumerist notions of individual sovereignty and free choice.

Introduction

The WorkChoices legislation which came into effect on 27 March 2006 was first introduced to the Australian public through an extensive advertising campaign that began in October 2005. The campaign included the release of a 68-page booklet and a series of television, radio and newspaper advertisements. Television advertisements screened for 90 seconds during prime time, and print advertisements dominated the pages of both broad-sheet and tabloid newspapers across the country. Advertisements of this size are very expensive; for example, the cost of running a four-page advertisement in all the major metropolitan newspapers on just one day, Wednesday 12 October, was $1 million (Norington 2005). In fact, the campaign which ran for just under three weeks cost the Australian taxpayer an estimated $40 million (Milne 2005). It would appear that the campaign was cut short partly because of public outcry about the use of so much taxpayer money to fund advertisements promoting government policy, and partly because, despite their length and expense, the advertisements failed to convince the Australian public of the need for change. Polling during the campaign showed that while awareness of the reforms rose as a result of the advertisements, support for ‘reform’ fell during the campaign, down one percentage point, with just 23% of voters supporting the proposed changes (Humphries 2005, 2).

A US national pollster, Vic Fingerhut, commissioned by the ACTU to examine the polls conducted during the campaign, pronounced the Governments’ advertisements a disaster. Based on his many years working on Democrat campaigns, he argued that policy was not the central issue in successful political campaigns but rather ‘language and the way you frame an issue’ (Fingerhut cited in Milne 2005, 8). It is this very point about the use of language to reframe an issue that drew our attention to the Government’s extensive industrial relations advertising campaign. In this paper, we focus on the Government’s newspaper advertisements to show how they attempt to reshape the discourse about industrial relations in a way that removes it from the domains of industrial law and production processes. Analysis of the advertisements highlights the
way in which industrial relations has been reframed within a discourse of consumption that privileges notions of choice and individualism and where we are no longer ‘workers’, whether male or female, but ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ (du Gay 1996, 182).

While our paper focuses on the newspaper advertisements, we see our work within a broader context of structural and discursive shifts that reflect the move to reconstruct industrial relations outside traditional notions of ‘work’ and industrial relations legislation. We recognise that much industrial relations writing has been gender-blind but also note that of late, more attention has been paid to this deficiency (see for example, Pocock 1997; Baird 2003). To date, most analysis has focused on the impact of structural shifts as a result of the Howard Government’s industrial relations reform agenda. The aim of this paper is to highlight the significant discursive shifts that are also underway in order to show that we have indeed entered a new era where not only the structures and processes have changed but also the discourse used to talk about industrial actors and the system. Nevertheless, these discursive shifts continue to ignore the worker as gendered, despite the significant changes in workforce participation and social attitudes.

The paper is structured as follows. The following section outlines our theoretical and methodological approach, beginning with an explanation of the critical discourse traditions that have informed this project and its research questions. We also articulate some of the key assumptions underpinning our approach before describing the data we used for analysis and the specific methods that were employed. In the next section of the paper we present our findings, showing how the advertisements construct industrial relations actors, institutions and the IR system through shifts in discourse that reshape the very meaning of ‘work’ and ‘worker’. In the final section of the paper, we discuss the implications of these shifts in meaning and the way in which consumerist discourse is used in the advertisements to depoliticise work, de-gender the employee and ultimately undermine employee rights.

Our Approach

Discursive studies are beset by both different definitions of ‘discourse’ as well as a broad variety of approaches and methods of discourse analysis. For our purposes, we adopt du Gay’s definition of discourse as:

... a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. Thus the term refers both to the production of knowledge through language and representations and the way that knowledge is institutionalised, shaping social practices and setting new practices into play (du Gay 1996, 43).

This definition highlights that studying discourse thus means more than examining language use; it entails studying language use (and other systems of meaning) as a form of social practice (Candlin 1997; Fairclough 1992), and a way of reflecting and shaping society by constructing versions of the social order (Jaworski & Coupland 1999). Similarly, there is a large range of methods used in discourse analysis. Approaches differ as to their level of analysis; some focus on the micro-level of language use, whereas others discuss discourse as a much broader phenomenon, as a way of communicating about a particular topic as in du Gay’s definition.
Within discourse studies, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is distinguished by its explicit concern with the reproduction of power relationships and revealing structures of inequality (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Fairclough 2001; Fairclough & Wodak; van Dijk 1997; Wodak 2001a). There are two more specific characteristics of CDA that are particularly relevant for our purposes here. The first is that CDA attempts to contribute to and engage with other forms of critical social research (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999, Wodak 2001a) by showing the role that language and discourse more broadly play in maintaining current structures of power or enacting social change. This can be seen in the use of CDA to research the construction of gender identities and the reproduction of gender prejudice in discourse (see for example, Garnsey & Rees 1996; Gill 1993; Tannen 1994; Stokoe 1998; West et al. 1997). Such a contribution can provide an additional basis for social critique and potential resistance. The second is that CDA needs to ground its claims in close textual analysis, as well as show how this connects to broader structural and social change. For our analysis we use two WorkChoices advertisements as illustrative texts; these advertisements commissioned by the Howard Government appeared in major state and national Australian newspapers during October 2005 (see attachments 1 and 2). In terms of 'genre' or text type, the two texts are examples of political advertising, a hybrid genre that mixes argument and marketing (Wodak 2001b). More generally, we regard discourse and language as systems of meaningful choices being produced by acts making choices from shared systems of knowledge and beliefs, and constructing certain forms of social identities and social relations between different subjects or actors (Fairclough 1995, Halliday 1994). However, to be meaningful, texts rely on the active role of the reader in making connections between their different elements. In reality, the reader is one of the key identities created by texts. We see texts as constituting certain forms of social identities and social relations that individuals adopt and perform in discourse, and these identities are constructed and maintained through the interaction of individuals and groups. Texts are directed at a specific audience, and the reader must occupy a subject position created by the text in order to make sense of it. The reader's understanding of the text is shaped by their prior knowledge and beliefs, and their interpretation of the text reflects their own social and cultural context. In relation to the first characteristic, we are aiming to contribute to existing critique of the Howard Government's industrial relations reform agenda. We are interested in the following questions:

- What identities are constructed in the advertisements?
- What versions of the social order and social relationships are constructed and promoted in the advertisements, and specifically, how the advertisements promote the case for legislative change and a change in social relations, and
- How do the advertisements contribute to the reproduction of gender identities and the reproduction of gender prejudice in discourse?
• What are the broader political and social implications of these constructions?

Following van Dijk’s suggestions (1997, 2001) we employed multiple methods to enhance our understanding of how discourse operated. These methods included techniques drawn from literary analysis (narrative structure, use of imagery, metaphors [Lieblich et al. 1998; Reissman 1993]), visual semiotics (visual layout of advertisements, photos, typeface [Williamson, 1978]), argumentation (how arguments are structured to justify particular conclusions [Wodak 2001b]) and critical linguistics (Fowler 1991, 1996; Paltridge 2000) including analysis of transitivity (how are social processes represented? which social actors are positioned as actors? who is doing what to whom?), modality (what is the attitude of the writer?), and word choice or lexical register (using the same or related words creates links within the text and outside to broader discourses and shared understandings). In the next section we present our findings focusing firstly on how industrial relations actors are constructed and secondly, how the advertisements construct the proposed changes to federal industrial relations legislation. In the following section, we address the third issue of broader political and social implications.

Findings

The first advertisement (‘Ad 1’, reproduced as attachment 1) appeared in mid-October 2005. It is lengthy (3,500 words) and uses both photos and written text. There is an initial narrative or explanation written in easily accessible language followed by more details about the legislative changes using textboxes and list structures, with the writing style becoming increasingly dense and technical in the second half of the text. The second print advertisement (‘Ad 2’, reproduced as attachment 2) promoting the WorkChoices legislative changes appeared approximately two weeks after the first. Comparing to the first advertisement, this second one is much shorter, is written in a simpler style, makes no use of pictures and is framed as a personal address from the Prime Minister, John Howard, to the reader.

What Identities are Constructed in the Advertisements?

The reader as an ‘Australian’ first, employee last

Readers are ‘hailed’ or addressed firstly as ‘Australians’ who are concerned about national economic issues. For example, in Ad 2, there is an initial statement that takes up the entire left hand side of the double page (‘Australia can’t afford to stand still’) and the advertisement continues with ‘If we’re serious about an even stronger economy, more jobs and higher wages we need a new workplace relations system’. Here the identity of ‘we’ is left open – the only referent that precedes it is ‘Australia’. As such, the ‘we’ suggests a reference to ‘we Australians’. This is reinforced in patterns of lexical cohesion where the text slips easily between ‘Australia’, ‘Australians’ and ‘we’. Employees and workers are only mentioned towards the end of the advertisement and the reader is not addressed as one of them; employees appear as a topic of discourse rather than as subjects or active agents, for example, ‘there is no greater protection we can give Australian workers and their families’. Here ‘Australian workers and their families’ are the passive beneficiaries of the legislative changes that the ‘we’ has helped to bring about.

Similarly in Ad 1, the reader is initially hailed as an ‘Australian’, a member of an undifferentiated, gender-neutral, collective national identity. References to ‘Australia’ and the Australian economy are substituted by the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ to reinforce the shared nature of this national identity. Then the reader is appealed to as ‘people’, as in ‘By encouraging people
to work together’, again denoting an undifferentiated social identity. Next the reader is addressed as either an employee or employer, though the advertisement is careful to imply that it does not matter which: ‘Whether you’re an employee or an employer…’. Only finally does it become apparent that the advertisement is directed to readers as employees: ‘People on federal awards: If you currently work under a Federal award…’. We argue that this ambiguity has a strategic purpose in creating a hierarchy of ‘subject positions’ for the reader moving from the broadest of ‘Australian’ to the most narrow or specific ‘employee’. The importance of employees or workers as a distinct social category is downplayed in various ways in both the advertisements, as are other socially differentiated identities such as gender.

In this context, the five photos Ad 1 also indicate how workers are conceptualised in the text. Interestingly, it is in the photos (and not the text) that we see gender differentiation, although the visuals suggest that men and women are equally protected by the new law. The first photo features a group of four employees, two men and two women, in a factory setting, smiling at the camera. The second photo is of a mother and child, and the third features a smiling pregnant woman talking on the phone and holding a cup of coffee. In the fourth photo, a single male employee, with a tattoo, is smiling and facing the camera, set against a manufacturing background. The last photo is of two middle-aged women, smiling and facing the camera, one holding her thumb up, against a similar background. There are no photos of employers and employees together, and no photos of managerial or white-collar, service sector or professional employees, and no attempts to overtly represent cultural diversity. Three of the five photos feature industrial backdrops and employees who would all appear to be ‘blue-collar’; this suggests that ‘employees’ affected by, or concerned about, legislative changes are likely to belong to the ‘old economy’ of manufacturing, the traditional heartland of unionism.

Blurring the line between employees and employers
The differences between employees and employers are obscured through various discursive means. For example, throughout the first page of Ad 1, ‘employees’ are mentioned separately only once but the phrase ‘employees and employers’ (and variations) is repeated six times on the first page of this four-page advertisement. This repetition builds associations so that the reader is encouraged to see these social actors as belonging together and equivalent. Moreover, they are encouraged to see the differences between them as unimportant ‘Whether you’re an employee or an employer, your rights will be protected’. Social actors are also referred to by generic and gender-neutral terms: ‘people’, ‘someone’, ‘anyone’, (rather than ‘employers’ or ‘employees’). Through these means, the text creates the impression that it is not important to differentiate between employees and employers, and that these social actors are equivalent. We argue that this purposeful linguistic blurring of the distinctions between employees and employers contributes to a depoliticising of industrial relations where divisions between employees and employers are rendered unimportant.

Furthermore, the possibility that employers may contravene employment legislation is obscured by the way sentences are structured. For example: ‘It is unlawful to terminate someone because of…’ and ‘Employees who believe they have been unlawfully terminated will be eligible…’. In this context, the elision of the employer’s role downplays the potential for conflict between employers and employees and the role of industrial legislation in providing protection and remedies for employees against the actions of employers.
**Government and federal institutions**

Similarly, the role of the Government in changing federal industrial relations legislation is downplayed through the use of language in both advertisements. For example, Ad 2 simply states ‘Introducing WorkChoices’ but does not explicitly state who is introducing it or who created it:

> The creation of WorkChoices will move us towards one simpler, national workplace relations system.
> It will improve productivity, encourage more investment, provide a real boost to the economy and lead to more jobs and higher wages (Introducing WorkChoices).

From this point on, *WorkChoices* is cast as the active agent, bringing about positive changes, rather than the Government. Such linguistic structures attempt to depoliticise the legislative changes by obscuring the actors involved.

In contrast to the agency accorded *WorkChoices*, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) is cast in the role of a service provider, with employees and employers as consumers. Apart from the title of the legislation (*WorkChoices*), in Ad 1, the word ‘choice’ only occurs in relation to dispute settling procedures and the role of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC): ‘employees and employers can choose to use’ the model dispute settling procedure included in the *WorkChoices* legislation. They are also able to choose between ‘dispute resolution specialists’ of whom the AIRC is just one. This, the text stresses, constitutes ‘genuine choice’ for employees and employers, with the AIRC being cast in the role of a service provider.

**How Are Proposed Changes to IR System Constructed?**

*Why change?*

Both advertisements aim to persuade readers of the need for change to the industrial relations system. They do this in different ways by constructing narratives about the past, present and future of ‘workplace relations’. In Ad 1, the initial narrative explanation begins in the past and tells us of the changes that have already taken place that have resulted in beneficial outcomes. The Australian workplace relations system is depicted as an evolutionary form where change is ‘natural’ and gradual. Within this context, the current system is depicted as problematic because it is retarding this ‘natural’ evolution, change and movement towards the future. By using this evolutionary motif, and repetition of the word ‘continuity’ and its variants (‘continuing’, ‘continues’), the changes that result from the *WorkChoices* legislation are able to be portrayed as a ‘natural’ part of life, and necessary for continued evolution and improvement.

In contrast, Ad 2 uses a relatively straightforward narrative structure. The first half constructs the problem and builds to a climax, at which point *WorkChoices* is introduced as the solution to this crisis. The second half then focuses on providing more details of how *WorkChoices* will result in a prosperous future.

A number of different discursive features contribute to the depiction of a current state of crisis in the first half of Ad 2. The writer frames the depiction as factual, using mostly relational processes and present tense verbs to represent present reality such as the phrase ‘we need’. The cumulative effects of repeating this phrase contribute to the representation of current crisis as consisting of a series of unmet needs. The modal operators used leave no room for doubt or indeterminacy (e.g., ‘cannot stand still’, ‘must reform’).
The ‘reality’ and urgency of the current state of crisis and the need to act is also accomplished at the level of argumentation, by reliance on four ‘topoi’ that link and justify the conclusions drawn from the claims that are made (Wodak 2001b, 74). Firstly, the ad relies on the topos of ‘burdening’; in other words, if a country is ‘burdened’ by a particular problem, one should act to diminish this burden. Here the ‘burden’ is presented as the existing industrial relations system which is held responsible for various negative economic consequences and which belongs to a bygone era:

We are labouring under a workplace system that was largely designed over a century ago to deal with the problems of a different time and a different world.

Secondly, the advertisement uses the related topos of finances; that is, the costs of the current system are judged as too high and as having negative effects, for example, it is depicted as ‘costing Australians precious new employment opportunities’. Thirdly, the topos of danger or threat is evident in the way the risks of ‘doing nothing’ are presented as likely to result in negative consequences (e.g., ‘sluggish economic growth and high unemployment’). According to the logic of this topos then, one is compelled to act to diminish the threat. Lastly, the topos of reality is also apparent in the descriptions of the current state of crisis: this is how reality is; therefore specific actions should be taken (Wodak 2001b, 76).

The role of law

Given that the purpose of the advertisements is to persuade readers of the need to change current industrial relations laws, the treatment of the role of employment law in these advertisements is particularly interesting. In different ways, both advertisements undermine the importance of industrial relations law. For example, on the surface, Ad 1 would appear to be highlighting the legal protections available to employees. The words ‘protected by law’ appear in larger typeface, on an angle, as if stamped across the conditions and entitlements being described. However, the first time this stamp appears, it is positioned beside text that is denigrating the role of law as ‘red tape’ that is unnecessary, confusing and ‘holding Australia back’. We would argue that while this phrase appears to be reassuring the reader of the legal protections WorkChoices will provide, it carries connotations from this initial use; thus when it is subsequently used, it has negative associations. Similar associations are created by coupling industrial words with other negative terms, as in the repeated phrase ‘award reliant employees’. In contrast, nowhere does the term ‘agreement reliant employee’ appear. The phrase ‘award reliant’ suggests a lack of independence and self-reliance on the part of employees. Being self-reliant is an important principle of conservative political ideology; thus in relying on ‘awards’, these employees are not conforming to the citizen ‘ideal’ promoted by New Right governments.

Ad 2 foregrounds macro economic issues, the national economy, national economic position relative to other countries, and aggregate economic measures (economic growth, unemployment rates). Questions about the distribution of economic benefits or the existence of different views about whether change is necessary or the form that change should take are omitted from the text. In addition, issues of equity, social justice and the effects of such changes on conditions at work are all eclipsed by the repetition of the phrase ‘more jobs and higher wages’. Unions are not mentioned at all, whereas employees/workers and the role of law in protecting employees’ rights only appears once, towards the end, and framed in a particular way:
At the same time we must ensure that employees’ minimum standard conditions are protected by law.

However, there is no greater protection we can give Australian workers and their families than a new workplace relations system that helps build the stronger economy needed to deliver more jobs and higher wages.

Thus employment law does appear but in such a way that the need for legal protection of employees is able to be downplayed. Here law is not as important or as efficacious in protecting employees as economic growth. This is also one of the few places in the advertisement where a conjunction is used (‘However…’). The rest of the ad uses simple clauses without many conjunctions so that the reader is relied upon to make the appropriate connections. In contrast, here the nature of the intended connection is explicitly articulated in an attempt to restrict the range of possible meanings that could be attributed.

Language of work and choice

Finally, the legislative change is referred to as ‘WorkChoices’ throughout both the advertisements. This title deserves some closer analytic attention, as it purposefully joins two separate words that have different discursive overtones. Firstly, the advertisements both rely on the language of work and employment. However, the meaning of these words is at least partly dependent on the immediate context, and here we see evidence of linguistic ‘engineering’ designed to produce certain political effects. For example, the employment related phrase ‘balance work and family life’ is introduced early on in Ad 1 as one of the goals of the new system. Having first used it in this context, ‘balance’ reappears in the statement immediately following the ‘work and family life’ reference: ‘We also need to make our workplace relations system fairer and provide a better balance in the workplace for employees and employers’. Later on it appears in the first textbox in the last point: ‘The new workplace relations system… WILL better balance the unfair dismissal laws’. The positive connotations associated with the word balance in the context of the phrase ‘work and family life’ are used to frame subsequent uses of this word. However the context of its use in these later positions in the text are quite different and left strategically ambiguous. In both of its subsequent uses, it is unclear what is being balanced and why balance or re-balancing is necessary; the only inference that could be drawn is that there is a current state of ‘imbalance’ which is inherently undesirable and unfair.

Such ambiguity is also evident in other uses of the language of work and employment. ‘Work’ and its variants are used to denote a variety of processes, rather than referring to paid or unpaid employment. The industrially specific meanings of the word ‘work’ and its variants are diffused by drawing on different cultural meanings of this word, illustrated in the following examples. Alternative words are included in brackets following each quote as a way of showing how other words could have been substituted without changing the meaning:.

Australian workers and Australian businesses have started to change the way they work [operate] [Ad 1].

…more employees and employers have been sitting down together, talking and working out their own workplace arrangements [developing] [Ad 1].

If we are to grow and prosper, we need to continue working together to implement fair, practical and sensible changes to our workplaces [cooperating, collaborating] [Ad 1].
By encouraging people to work together and by continuing the improvement in our workplaces, WorkChoices will also help continue the improvement in our living standards and quality of life. And that’s something worth working for [Ad 1] [striving for, attaining].

We are labouring under a workplace system that was largely designed over a century ago [Ad 2] [operating].

The use of work-related language in this context creates the impression that the advertisement is focused on work. However, if we analyse the immediate context of these uses, we see that it is not work (paid or unpaid employment) that is being discussed but a range of other social processes. We argue that using ‘work’ and its variants in these ways obscures the unique characteristics of employment and employment law. If ‘we’ (Government, Australian citizens, employers, employees, readers) are all engaged in ‘work’, why do ‘workers’ need to be singled out for special legal protection?

The language of ‘choice’ is also clearly significant to the name ascribed to the legislation and the way the advertisements operate. ‘WorkChoices’ combines language from two different discourses – that of production (work) and consumption (choice) (du Gay 1996). From the outset of Ad 1, the ‘crisis’ is constructed in the negative as a lack of affordability, that is to say, not being able to consume, to exercise the primary right of consumption, that of choice. Stability, ‘standing still’, is depicted as a luxury that ‘we’ cannot afford; it is out of our reach as consumers. In this way, the advertisement is able to blend macro national economic issues with the references more associated with the ‘lifeworld’ (Habermas 1984) of the household budget. The phrase ‘we need’ is repeated and the cumulative effect of such repetition is to suggest a litany of important items that we will not be able to obtain unless ‘we’ have WorkChoices. The current system is depicted as ‘not a good buy’, that is to say, it costs too much. Countries have a simple choice, between ‘going forwards or backwards’ and if ‘we’ do not make the right choice, as responsible consumers, we will risk the economic future of Australia. Thus the risk and crisis that is represented in the advertisement is primarily one of consumption, and the reader is ‘hailed’ as a citizen/consumer, rather than as an employee or worker.

Moreover, while the discourse of choice is featured, the advertisement actually operates to restrict choice. It constructs stark binaries between possibilities, either serious or absurd, either complicated or simple, either forwards or backwards (and explicitly rules out the choice of ‘standing still’). There is no ‘middle ground’ in the advertisement and the simple, stark choices presented are mirrored in the typeface and ad layout. This is particularly apparent in the first page which features thick white typeface on a black background; in other words, the choice is a simple ‘black and white’ one. This is one of the central paradoxes of the advertisement: WorkChoices suggests the advent of more choice, yet the ad works by circumscribing and limiting choice to a stark ‘yes or no’.

Discussion

In this section, we elaborate on some of our key findings and discuss their broader political and social implications. Some of these implications will be familiar to industrial relations practitioners and academics, and our contribution is to show how these longstanding issues are realised and suggested at the micro-level of language use. Others will be less familiar, and here we aim to show how CDA can provide additional insights into the ideology at work in the
discourse of the *WorkChoices* campaign and the Howard Government’s industrial relations agenda.

Firstly, our findings have highlighted one of the central contradictions of these advertisements. Their overt purpose is to persuade and inform readers about the new employment legislation. However at the same time, employment law is represented as unnecessary, as ‘red tape’, as relevant only to a small section of the Australian community, and as belonging to a bygone era when manufacturing and blue-collar work dominated the Australian economy and labour market. This effect is produced by different discursive means: the sequence of themes in the text, the structure of clauses and the content and juxtaposition of photos and text. In addition, the legal protection of employees is constructed as unnecessary because of the promotion of a unitarist view of the employment relationship in these advertisements: if there are no legitimate differences between employers and employees and they have equal bargaining power, then the rationale for employment legislation becomes doubtful. The boundaries between employees and employers are purposefully blurred, and broader, undifferentiated social categories are foregrounded. Readers are appealed to as ‘Australians’ and ‘people’ rather than as employers or employees, or even, dare we say it, women or men, male or female employees. These words – employees, employers – are used in such a way that the reader is encouraged to think of them as equivalent and as constituting one, non-gendered group. The possibility that employers will contravene employment law is obscured by the way sentences are structured. In our analysis, we indicated that we see these discursive characteristics as a way of ‘depoliticising’ work and workers by encouraging readers to see employees and employers as equivalent and undifferentiated, and to see ‘work’ denoting a range of social processes in which everyone is engaged, rather than referring to paid or unpaid employment. Use of employment-related words (such as ‘work’ and its variants) to denote a range of social processes diffuses what is unique about paid employment, and by implication, undermines the need for employment law that gives special protection to employees. Thus we see how ideology operates, not just at the level of content but also in the form and processes of meaning of these two advertisements.

Thus far, none of these implications is perhaps surprising, given the radical, neo-liberal industrial relations agenda and conservative social agenda of the Howard Government. However, our analysis also suggests other implications that are less familiar and that enrich our understanding of how the ideology of these advertisements operate. The *WorkChoices* advertisements not only attempted to blur the boundaries between employers and employees but also to blur the boundaries of other social categories, including those around gender. This blurring is inherent in the title of the legislation – *WorkChoices* – where ‘work’ is combined with ‘choice’; the former word draws on a discourse of production, whereas the latter draws on a discourse of consumption (see du Gay 1996). While the legislation is about work, its appeal lies in its promotion of ‘choice’ with the implication that it will create more choice (‘choices’). ‘Choice’ is a familiar ‘common sense’ term with positive connotations but it can be ‘unpacked’ using a CDA approach. ‘Choice’ is the primary right of the consumer, and such prominent use of this word indicates the *WorkChoices* campaign draws heavily on a discourse of consumption (Burchell 1993), in which the consumer identity is dominant. This discourse privileges individual freedom, choice and autonomy: individual consumers are expected to conduct themselves in appropriately ‘rational’ ways, exercise freedom of choice and accept responsibility for the outcomes of those choices (Rose 1989, 1999; Du Gay 1996). The ‘consumer’ becomes the ‘sovereign’ of primary identity,
overtaking and changing other forms of economic identity such as that of ‘worker’. Workers are now encouraged to think of themselves as ‘consumers’ in employment:

… to adopt a ‘consuming’ relationship to self where they make a project of themselves, and where they develop a style of living that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves. In other words, ‘work’ as an activity is re-imagined through the language of consumer culture (du Gay 1996, 78).

We argue that deploying this discourse depoliticises work by reducing jobs to just another choice in a range of ‘lifestyle options’ (Webb 2004) available to individuals in ‘making up’ (Hacking 1986) their lives. The citizen is represented as a choosing consumer (Rose 1993) with ‘no choice but to choose’ (Giddens 1991, 81) and this identity privileges freedom of individual choice above other social rights. Hence it is an inadequate basis for understanding issues arising from collective or social identity (such as gender equity or discrimination at work) and it leads to an ‘individualisation’ of ‘social problems’, such as unemployment, whereby those who experience these ‘problems’ are held accountable for them. Moreover, it does not acknowledge that the individually-based rights of freedom, autonomy and control are experienced unequally by different social groups such as women (Platman 2004; Webb 2004). In choosing to emphasise individual freedom and control, the institutional, economic and social constraints experienced by different groups in the labour market go unacknowledged.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our critical analysis of the controversial WorkChoices advertisements has shown that a discursive approach can complement existing industrial relations scholarship by showing how political struggles are played out in language. In this context, we see our own work as providing an additional basis for critique by helping to ‘name the discursive trick’ (Pocock 2005) of the Howard Government’s WorkChoices campaign. Our findings showed how the advertisements attempted to blur the boundaries between employees and employers, downplay the significance of ‘work’ and ‘worker’, and appeal to the reader as a gender-neutral ‘citizen-consumer’ who, above all, has the right ‘to choose’ in accordance with their individual preferences. In light of these findings, it is perhaps instructive to recall Horkheimer’s view that critical theory should ‘assist in ‘remembering’ a past that [is] in danger of being forgotten’ (Wodak 2001a, 9) by reasserting the relevance of ‘worker’ as a social category and contesting attempts to consign it to the past.

References


