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To cite this article: Michał Krzyżanowski (2020) Normalization and the discursive construction of “new” norms and “new” normality: discourse in the paradoxes of populism and neoliberalism, *Social Semiotics*, 30:4, 431-448, DOI: [10.1080/10350330.2020.1766193](https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766193)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766193>



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Published online: 08 Jun 2020.



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Normalization and the discursive construction of “new” norms and “new” normality: discourse in the paradoxes of populism and neoliberalism

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ABSTRACT

Highlighting a number of perspectives from critical social theory and research as well as critical language and discourse studies, this paper explores conceptions of normalisation particularly relevant to the analysis of its dynamics and trajectories in public discourse. Starting by disentangling the complex relationship between norms, normality, normalization and discourse, the article argues that two major trends in research on normalization – of violence and deviance – have been particularly influential in designing theories and analyses of normalisation processes. They have also been pivotal in pointing to path-dependencies of normalization processes, to the centrality of classification, distinction and stigmatization or to the role of pre-/legitimation and legitimation via social imaginaries as those which characterise the introduction and communication of new norms and normativities in the public domain. Crucially, many of those features of normalization are often both sustained and nested in context-dependent formats of normalization discourse. The latter, drawing on a wide array of discursive and linguistic features explored in the article, effectively enables the orchestration of new discursive shifts in public discourse as well as the introduction and pre-/legitimation of new or recontextualised norms and perceptions of what is, and what is not, acceptable and unacceptable in politics, media, institutions and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Normalization; populism; neoliberalism; discourse

1. Introduction

While until recently many customary and codified norms have regulated how people express themselves or speak in public, it seems that, nowadays, there are no recognisable limits of what and how something can and cannot be said in the public domain in general, and in media and politics in particular. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson recently shouted “traitors” at British Members of Parliament and has frequently used threatening language to address domestic and international (e.g. EU) leaders. US President Donald Trump regularly calls his opponents “phoney” or “dopey” and labels media and journalists as “corrupt” and their reporting “fake news”. These are just a few, and not really the most radical, instances of the ever more offensive and abusive language now used in

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“mainstream” politics. At the same time, the discourse of even long-established media closely follows suit and often openly stigmatises social groups, e.g. calling welfare recipients “losers” or “benefit scroungers”, or viewing migrants, refugees and minorities as “criminals”, “invaders” or “mobs”. Indeed, practically every day now, irrespective of the country or continent, we encounter these and other similar new statements in public discourse which – whilst shocking to some and considered outright offensive, racist, sexist, racist, misogynist, ageist or otherwise discriminatory – increasingly result in nothing but a shrug from many members of the public. Indeed, we are now more than ever – and sadly with decreasing opposition and ever less powerful counter-discourses – faced with language which pre-/legitimises views, ideologies and positions that were until recently treated as radical and socially unacceptable. They were once located outside the widely accepted – or at least widely recognised – norms of public expression yet have now become normalised as no longer deviant but, increasingly, standard elements of public discourse.

The current collection aims to show that such new/changing public discourse, characterised as it is by uncivility, dogmatic politicisation and ideologization as well as fact denial and norm-breaking, is just a token of a much deeper transformation of norms of public expression and ways in which contemporary public discourse reflects and represents, as well as imagines, social relations. *This transformation is referred to here as normalization, i.e. a set of simultaneous or subsequent discursive strategies which gradually introduce and/or perpetuate in public discourse some new – and in most cases often uncivil or untrue – patterns of representing social actors, processes and issues. Importantly, these discursive strategies are initiated and recontextualised as part and parcel of wider – and in most cases pre-determined – forms of social, political and economic action designed to not only change the norms of social conduct but also to gain legitimacy from such a change and from the introduction of a related, “new” normative order.*

Hence, in this Special Issue, we want to explore not only the current state of the art of contemporary public discourse but also the process of its gradual, often context-dependent change, which reflects as well as nests the dynamics of introduction and perpetuation, as well as the gradual normalisation, of key radicalised norms of describing the social, political and economic reality. By doing so, we not only point to key contemporary discursive dynamics of normalization but also show how, in a dialectic specific for, say, critical-analytical thinking (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Wodak 1996, 2001), such key recent shifts in public discourse must be viewed as reflecting and changing *as well as* fostering the transformation of key social norms related to modes and limits of public expression. Therefore, we point, on the one hand, to actual language that emphasises and legitimises (van Leeuwen 2007; Reyes 2011), as well as, increasingly, pre-/legitimises (Krzyżanowski 2014) new norms. We also point to key *discursive shifts* (Krzyżanowski 2013, 2018; see also Krzyżanowski 2020 – in this Special Issue) in public language that have recently been orchestrated by various social, political and economic actors in order to introduce such new norms. On the other hand, however, we also want to point to wider and more macro-level or transnational patterns of *discursive change* (Fairclough 1992) and highlight the larger social, political and economic discourses that – often in a transnational manner – frame and drive different context-specific shifts, thus often giving them legitimate potency and boosting their narrative and rhetorical aptitude.

Contributions to this Special Issue argue that whilst many facets of such aforementioned discursive change are important and crucial for the dynamics of contemporary

public discourse, among these *the forces of populism in politics and elsewhere on the one hand, and of neoliberal political economy on the other, currently dictate major trajectories of public discourse along with normalization, as well as the recontextualisation of related “new” social norms*. As we will show, the global rise and pervasive spread of populist and, in particular, right-wing populist politics and ideologies in recent years on the one hand, and both transnational and nationally-specific solidification and further expansion of neoliberalism in the wider public domain on the other, are two of the fundamental reasons why tendencies introducing, pre-legitimising and normalising new/changed social norms are now so prevalent and dynamic. We hence target strategies salient to forging legitimacy for the endemic modes of ideological behaviour coined by populism and neoliberalism, as well as their, by now widespread, politics of exclusion. These, we show, often rest on targeting various social groups as well as legitimising wider uncivility (Chen 2017; Rossini 2019a, 2019b) as a token of or “rude democracy” (Herbst 2010) or populist “in-your-face politics” (Mutz 2015) in the political realm. But we also – often simultaneously – trace the discursive nature of inequality-driven “neoliberal violence” that views “neoliberalism” as a “discourse whose assumptions and influence on contemporary institutions normalize violence” (Berdayes and Murphy 2016, 1). As we also demonstrate, the normalization strategies we analyse also increasingly rely on the transfer of many discursive strategies between the two hegemonic modes of populism and neoliberalism as a token of both populist/nativist as well as economically driven patterns of social exclusion and discrimination (Wodak 2019).

The following papers argue that many key trends in contemporary public discourse – such as, inter alia, the increasing discursive legitimisation of nativism or political opportunism, the ongoing celebration and mediatisation of politics or the ideological and often radical politicisation of not only everyday life but also many/most public issues – are often used as foundational resources for the normalising strategies analysed. These ideologically conditioned discursive tendencies open up, as we show, many path-dependent trajectories that facilitate the normalisation of what used to be beyond accepted norms or even deemed outright unacceptable. They lead to the fact that wider radicalism becomes commonly “increasingly tolerated, or even embraced by business, civil society, economic, media and political circles” (Mudde 2019, 169), with media voices especially remaining ambivalent, opportunistic and problematic. Their either continuous or on-and-off embracing of various populist and nativist views and their tacit yet systematic endorsement of neoliberally-driven social reality (Phelan 2014) and the ongoing economisation of wider social relations (Jessop 2012; Sum and Jessop 2013; Krzyżanowski 2016) all remain particularly salient.

But, on the other hand, the above discourse tendencies also contribute to the increasingly complex and highly ambivalent character of public discourse along with its wider *catch-all* logic and “chameleon-like quality which can adapt flexibly to a variety of substantive ideological values and principles” (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 4), as is evident in the context of populist politics. They, further, help to disguise dangerous ideas that are increasingly normalised, despite undermining the foundations of the modern liberal social order – e.g. with neoliberalism harbouring new social class divisions and wider modes of legitimising and mediating growing and quasi “natural” social inequalities (Sayer 2005; Krzyżanowski 2020 – in this Special Issue) or populism’s harbouring of authoritarianism, calls for violence, racism and wider uncivility as “new” norms of social and

political doing and acting (Cammaerts 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Brubaker 2017a, 2017b; see also Austermühl 2020; Krzyżanowski 2020; Reyes 2020 – all in this Special Issue). Last but not least, many of those tendencies in public discourse solidify the very hegemonic modes of discourse, to the extent that they prevent their effective undoing and any post-normalising counter-discursive action against the hugely harmful populist, neoliberal and wider exclusionary tendencies (see Pelsmaekers and Van Hout 2020 – in this Special Issue).

Indeed, while our main aim in this Special Issue is to point to the similarities, or even connections, and differences between various normalisation strategies – in traditional and online media, in politics and its mediated communication, and in the policy and discourse of public institutions – we also aim to explicate *the highly complex and often paradoxical nature of the contemporary language of normalisation*. As we show, normalization discourse draws on a multitude of discursive and linguistic resources of, inter alia, pre-/legitimation, us/them distinction, frame-shifting, redefinition, scapegoating and creating ambiguity or moral panic, and a number of other discursive strategies that effectively help to normalise nationalist, racist and other uncivil exclusionary and/or neoliberal ideologies. But we also show that not only in its linguistic and textual but also its conceptual (fake news, post-truth) or indeed strongly visual (e.g. memes, videos) character, contemporary mediated public discourse supports various patterns of normalisation.

By the same token, we show that discourse of normalization draws extensively on the recontextualisation (Bernstein 1990; Krzyżanowski 2016, 2018) of not only local but also transnational or even global patterns of discourse carrying exclusionary populist and neoliberal norms across national and geographic boundaries. It also draws on resources that are not only contemporary but also historical in nature, with many such past discursive patterns of legitimising social differences or social exclusion now often returning to pre-/legitimise contemporary trajectories of normalization. Therefore, while many analyses in this Special Issue are tied to contemporary cases where normalisation is evident and there are changes to the social reality in/through discourse, we also look into earlier/ historical examples of normalisation – e.g. in the context of the normalisation of the Holocaust in Europe during WWII (see Pollack 2020 – in this Special Issue) – to explicitly argue that normalisation is by no means a new process and that contemporary populism and neoliberalism often skilfully only reuse historical patterns of normalisation by recontextualising them in the context of modern societies of (sadly, now declining) liberal democracies.

2. Normalization, normality and normativity

Though normalization is a term widely known from various contexts (measurement systems, time, weather, physics etc), it has only relatively rarely come to be used in social or political contexts. Or, if such has indeed been the case, the connotations of normalization have usually been very ambivalent and in most cases negative, often bringing associations with attempts to define and classify who/what is “normal”, as well as excluding people, ideas and objects that apparently are not.

The first time the author of this essay learned about the very ideological and indeed ambiguous meaning of *normalization* in a social and public domain was in December

1981. This was at the time when martial law – otherwise known as a “State of War” (Kryżanowski 2009) – was introduced in Poland after the country’s communist regime violently crushed the anti-communist freedom movement led by the “Solidarity” trade union. On the night of 13 December 1981, when the martial law began, hundreds of Polish opposition dissidents were incarcerated and severe limitations of freedom on the wider society were imposed. In the following weeks, violent protests in various regions of Poland resulted in many casualties. But already, within a few weeks of the forceful introduction of martial law, Polish regime-obedient mass media and other channels of state propaganda started to use the famous phrase: *“despite disruptions, a significant degree of normalization is already settling in.”* While this phrase was repeated frequently across the then very limited and significantly curtailed Polish public sphere – and, to be sure, this was not the first time that Polish citizens heard that notion used by the communist state’s post-War propaganda – even looking with still very unaware and uninformed eyes, one could see that the reality surrounding us was, in fact, still very far from *normal*. Tanks and soldiers were still in the streets, there was still a curfew on any mobility from dusk till dawn, and there were still significant shortages of food and energy supplies, as well as a nationwide ban on using private means of transport (all during an exceptionally severe winter and temperatures frequently reaching -25°C). So, while we constantly heard the word “normalization”, it only told us that either our own ideas of “normality” were significantly different from those held by the then (state) powers, or the apparently encroaching “normalization” we were constantly being told about was just a case of manipulation and political illusion.

But perhaps the major problem was that not only in Poland in the early 1980s but also in many other places and at other times – including nowadays – *the notion of normalization has to a large extent been wrongly associated with the idea of normality, or with the often related process of the gradual (re)introduction of what is – or at least could be considered – a normal or accepted state of affairs.* True, normalization does – at least literally – allude to what is “normal”, but what it is most commonly really about is, first and foremost, the construction and introduction of a certain, indeed often new, normative order. *Normalization hence takes place when new norms and ideas of social order, strategically constructed in discourse, become – or are strategically assumed to become – part and parcel of mainstream or common thinking.* And, unlike in the Polish case mentioned above, normalization as a process requires thorough and critical analysis since, as such, it often takes place unnoticed. This is the case whenever its implied “natural” path dependency is presented – including discursively pre-/legitimised – as part and parcel of designed, and often orchestrated, actions of various social, political and economic actors.

Normalization – especially if seen as a process of introduction of new norms – is certainly not a new idea and it has, in fact, been researched widely and in a variety of contexts. Probably the first broadly acclaimed work on normalization – and one that additionally relates it to the changing logic of public discourse – was that of the twentieth century German philologist and diarist Victor Klemperer who worked extensively on documenting the propaganda language of National-Socialist “Third Reich” from the 1930s onwards. Klemperer, namely, pointed to the fact NS public discourse was not only characterised by the steady growth of the outright racist and discriminatory statements – of, in particular, anti-Semitic nature. Klemperer also showed that the increasing perception of such obvious racism as “normal” was facilitated by a deeper process of “blurring boundaries”

(Klemperer 2002, 66ff) in public and everyday language drawing on the interface between quasi-acceptable, commonplace slogans or recognisable pictograms and their new, ultra-nationalist and obviously racist and discriminatory meaning.

But norms and normativity have, as such, also been much debated more widely in modern social theory, with the likes of, e.g. Jürgen Habermas (1996) undertaking extensive analyses of their dynamics and change in legal systems and democratic politics and wider public spheres. Indeed, the disentangling the complex question of how normalization relates to norms/normativity on the one hand, and normality on the other, has, in fact, been inherent to most empirical normalization research. Therein, and especially while looking at work conducted in recent decades, various approaches have been proposed to show that normalization is an extremely relevant, multilevel process running across contexts as different as state politics or geopolitical relations (Margold 1999; Kramer and Kauzlarich 2010), through organizational contexts of work, economy or public services and public administration (Holligan 1999; Ashforth and Anand 2003; Earle, Spicer, and Peter 2010; Bogard et al. 2015; Jenkins and Delbridge 2017) to intergroup and interpersonal relations and conflicts (Wood 2001), or even individual human desires and needs (McWhorter 1999). In some areas of social research, e.g. social work, normalization has even been one of the key concepts which – in line with the postulated so-called “ecological approach” (Wolfensberger 1972; Wolfensberger and Tullman 1982; see also Thurman and Fiorelli 1979 for overview) – has been used very widely in work on, e.g. social services or special education.

Whilst clearly considered across a huge array of contexts, the majority of recent social science research on normalization falls into two wider tendencies of thinking about the ontology, logic or strategic nature of normalising processes. The first of these should be dubbed “post-Foucauldian” and macro-social, as it looks at *normalization in a top-down way*, i.e. as the key strategy of wider social, including public, discourses, which, through their hegemonic power, regulate the social reality and impose – via the introduction and legitimisation of norms – the conduct of various social groups and/or individuals. The second approach should probably be seen as considering *normalization in a more horizontal or processual manner*, i.e. as a token of social and individual, including linguistic/discursive, behaviour and conduct in specific “cultures” embedded by public/ private organizations or other social contexts. Interestingly, the two approaches may – albeit with a few exceptions (see Kramer and Kauzlarich 2010) – also overlap with wider trends in social research pertaining to exploration of the *normalization of different tokens of violence and ideology in the first case*, and of *various types/ formats of human/ social deviance in the second*. In so doing, they also draw on wider trends in critical or post-structuralist social research on, respectively, power and hegemony in, e.g. the post-Gramscian sense in the first case, or the long-established work within the sociology of deviance in both its post-Marxist (Spitzer 1975) or social-systemic (Rosenfeld 1989) guise in the second case.

2.1. Foucault and the discursive normalization of violence

The first of the major two approaches to normalization is very strongly connected to Michel Foucault (1990, 1995, 2007), who argued that, as such, normalization must be located within the wider security vs. discipline distinction wherein the process of

disciplining individuals and groups as a token of ideologically controlled power reproduction in society takes place. As Foucault explicitly argues, *normalization is a strongly path-dependent process that operates in a top-down way and aims to subsume others to its logic and strategic aims*. In essence, he maintained that it is extremely difficult to reverse the once unleashed power of “normalizing norms” which “thus hinder not only critical analysis itself but also, to the extent that they become naturalized, the recognition that such engagement is needed or possible at all” (Taylor 2009, 47).

Foucault also looked into various prerequisites of normalization, which, for him, were located within dimensions of the “discipline” itself. Therein, Foucault claimed, the classification/distinction dichotomy within disciplinary power comes to the fore as a strategy that “breaks down individuals, places, time, movements, actions and operations (...) breaks them down into components such that they can be seen, on the one hand, and modified on the other” (Foucault 2007, 56). This, very importantly, directly points to one of the central aspects of many normalization processes wherein the power of classification and making self/others visible/invisible remains central. There, strategies of stigmatising or over-highlighting social actors, processes or issues – or even creating “moral panic” surrounding them (see Cohen 1972; Thompson 1998; see also Austerlühl 2020 or Krzyżanowski 2020 – both in this Special Issue) – are often at the core of many normalising tendencies.

Interestingly, while disentangling the above connection between norms and normalization, Foucault also alludes to the fact that imaginaries of the eventually “normalised” – i.e. post-normalization – social order are among the central discursive constructs that already in the process of normalization pre-/legitimise the introduction of (new) norms. Hence, whilst norms generally exist within the social order and are commonly codified (most frequently in/by the law), the central problematic aspect of normalization is that it does not actually, contrary to its name, act within such well-defined and well-codified norms but, in fact, beyond them. Foucault hence suggests that “techniques of normalization develop from and below the system of law, in its margins or even against it” (Foucault 2007, 56).

Drawing on the above features of normalization (including classification/ distinction dichotomy, distinguishing the “normal” from the “abnormal”, recognising the centrality of post-normalization imaginaries), Foucault further argues that:

Disciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements and actions, to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal which is incapable of conforming to the norm. (ibid. 57)

However, while the norm is, Foucault argues, central, the key idea of the normalizing process is not to create its vision/ image as the overarching or dominant one, but to normalize it in a much more obscure or opaque manner. Normalization is, hence, a process both introducing as well as obscuring norms, whilst practices which carry new norms “become embedded to the point where they are perceived not as a particular set of prevailing norms, but instead simply as ‘normal’, ‘inevitable’” (Taylor 2009, 47).

2.2. Diane Vaughan's perspective on language in/and the normalization of deviance

The main inspiration for the second trend of research on normalization comes from the highly influential study by Diane Vaughan on *"The Challenger Launch Decision"* (1996), in which, drawing on the author's long-term organizational ethnography in the NASA organization, Vaughan explores the processes that preceded the tragic explosion of the flagship US Space Shuttle "Challenger" seconds after its launch on 28 January 1986. In her study, she looks at various patterns and path dependencies in organizational practices at NASA as well as at discursive strategies which helped to accept – and make generally acceptable – many unfortunate and clearly incorrect decisions taken during the development of the Challenger, whose eventual catastrophic demise was attributed to technical and engineering faults and negligence (many of which were, in fact, identified yet subsequently ignored in the construction process). Drawing on her indeed impressive study, Vaughan argues that the developments at NASA prior to the Challenger launch point to a variety of easily generalisable *meso- and micro-level dynamics and processes of normalization* and their inherent – and indeed largely repetitious – logic.

The first of Vaughan's key observations concerns the fact that normalization does not, in fact, relate to processes of transforming or sustaining existent norms but to the introduction of new ones. Hence, Vaughan argues, *normalization in most cases constitutes a process of more or less obvious acceptance and legitimation of deviance*. Indeed, she claims that it is deviance – not normality – that is effectively targeted in/through normalising processes whose aim is to strategically legitimise (previously) deviant positions as normal rather than to reveal their inherently "abnormal" character in relation to (pre-)existent norms. But Vaughan also points to the very peculiar logic of normalization which resides within the enactment and subsequent repetition of social practices, thus creating a specific *path dependency which sooner or later opens up a space for the strategic enactment of norm-undermining, and eventually norm-changing, discourse central to normalization processes*.

For example, Vaughan shows that repeated forms and formats of behaviour (e.g. meetings) very efficiently help to dismiss various critical voices and accept only those that emphasise the correctness of 'desired' or 'new' ways of thinking, thus often enabling the development of wider cultural patterns of a gradual approval of small deviations from previously accepted standards (for a related account of "autopoiesis" in institutional practice see, e.g. Muntigl, Weiss, and Wodak 1999; Krzyżanowski and Oberhuber 2008; Krzyżanowski 2011). Vaughan also shows that such repetitious logic also allows for the regular discarding of objective (e.g. expert) opinions on a path to creating progressively ever-more-stretched norms as part of the process of not objectively assessing or stating but, in fact, negotiating or undermining risk. These, in turn, sooner or later allow for vagueness and uncertainty, which are enacted strategically to introduce as new the once deviant positions and norms.

Hence, for Vaughan, normalization is not so much about normalizing in and of itself and not even – as e.g. Foucault (above) would have argued – about the newly-introduced norm. Instead, in Vaughan's model, *normalization is predominantly about the progressive and 'incremental expansion of normative boundaries: how small changes – new deviations that were slight deviations from the normal course of events, gradually became the norm,*

providing a basis for accepting additional deviance' (Vaughan 1996, 409; my emphasis). From a discursive point of view, this resorts to the creation of an often very peculiar discourse or language of normalization which, while drawing on various strategies, enables the aforementioned opening up of the "normative boundaries". Among such strategies, Vaughan identifies, for example, the progressive denial of risk by way of introducing new concepts which effectively dilute the gravity of deviance, in particular in its original sense (by, e.g., such oxymorons as "acceptable risk", "levels of criticality" or the like; see especially Vaughan 1996, 81–82). But such linguistic features are embedded in a number of wider discursive strategies – such as, very prominently, rationalization (of risk, its impact etc), positivism, denial of expertise, vagueness or ambivalence (MK: many of which by now dominate contemporary public discourse) – that enable normalization and open up the possibility for stretching – yet not breaking – the norms that effectively denote the advent of normalization.

3. Normalization in/as a (public) discourse

In addition to the above inspirations central to social-scientific thinking about normalization, several subsequent articles also build on crucial discourse-analytical work specifically focusing on normalization in/as a discourse, as well as yielding related concepts useful when explaining the discursive construction of normalization along with its very specific linguistic representations and displays.

The first of such views is certainly the idea of *naturalization* originally proposed by Fairclough (1992, 1995), denoting "the capacity to 'naturalize' ideologies, i.e. to win acceptance for them as non-ideological common sense" (Fairclough 2010, 30). Fairclough uses naturalization as a token of a wider process of hierarchisation of discourse, or more specifically of strategically building the distinction between "dominant" and "dominated" discourses. He argues that naturalization's overall aim is the generation of common sense around ideas which, as such, do not originate from within wider public – and it is certainly not aimed at the creation or preservation of the common good – but can clearly be ascribed to ideologies struggling and aiming to dominate the public mindset. Fairclough suggests that among several strategies of naturalization, *the discarding or silencing of non-dominant discourses allows the gradual naturalization of dominant discursive positions*. In the process described by Fairclough, non-dominant discourse/s often come/s to be deemed and treated as "arbitrary (in the sense of being among several possible ways of 'seeing things')" (Fairclough 1989, 91) and eventually treated as obsolete. At the same time, however, in the emergent absence of any opposing, counter-discursive voices, the dominant discourse "comes to be seen as natural, and legitimate because it is simply *the way of conducting oneself*" (ibid.; original emphasis). Importantly, as it becomes naturalised, the dominant discourse acquires a *quasi-neutral image*, which sustains its power gained by its often only illusionary loss of ideological character. Among the key discursive strategies which enable such neutralization of discourse as a token of its naturalization, Fairclough lists, inter alia, making a peculiar distinction between the "appearance of discourse and its underlying *essence*" (ibid., 92; original emphasis). He also points to the *autopoietic and legitimacy power of explanations and rationalization*, arguing that "explanations should be seen as *rationalizations* which cannot be taken at face value but are themselves in need of explanation" (ibid.; original emphasis).

In another crucial approach to normalization in/and discourse intersection, Gavriely-Nuri (2013) looks empirically at discourses which normalize war in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She argues that in that context, the main aim of normalization is, as argued above, to normalise the abnormality (of war) as well as to thus diminish its "cultural-cognitive dissonance" (ibid., 7) that is inherently part of a process whereby something as utterly unacceptable as war is being presented as acceptable. Whilst Gavriely-Nuri claims that the power of discourses normalizing war resides in their oppositional character vis-à-vis those arguing against military interventions and conflicts, she also emphasises that not only wars but also other "controversial social issues" – such as "poverty, diseases, corruption, earthquakes, global warming, ethnic minorities and disabled people" (ibid., 129) may be subjected to a very similar trajectory of processes of normalization. As the author claims, whether concerning war or other issues, normalization takes place by means of an array of similar discursive strategies. These in most cases include: (a) *euphemisation*, i.e. endowing certain concept – such as war – with a "positive appearance, character or valuation" (ibid., 2), including presenting it as a unique or "special opportunity" (ibid.), (b) *naturalization*, i.e. representing war and other events as "a kind of natural force, as a natural event or as the inevitable outcome of the laws of nature" (ibid.) and (c) *legitimization*, which aims to represent war and other events/ phenomena as "just, legitimate, and worthy of support, and as representing a moral act" (ibid., 3). An important final strategy that Gavriely-Nuri also points to as central in her normalization discourse is that defined as *symbolic annihilation*, indeed a classic concept known from media theories of under representation (Gerbner and Gross 1976; Tuchman 2000; see also Pollack 2020 – in this Special Issue) as well as related to strategies of complete/partial silencing/omitting of voices (e.g. Jaworski 1992; Schroeter and Taylor 2018). This strategy boils down to "a total exclusion of war, or some of its components, from the discourse by omitting or blurring its basic characteristics, such as death and destruction of the environment, or the moral, emotional and economic damage it may cause" (Gavriely-Nuri 2013, 3).

Further to the aforementioned approaches, several recent takes on the discourse of normalization have looked at its changing wider logic in the context of the gradual demise of liberal democracy. Among these, the linguistic approach from Link (2013) remains highly influential, along with his concept of "*interdiscourse*" which, it has been argued, is produced whenever normalization takes place and new norms are introduced. Through his idea – to some extent similar to Fairclough's naturalization concept (see above) – Link argues that starting from the 1968 protests in Europe which resulted in a very significant break to the public functioning of discourse, "normality" has been discursively established by means of combining "*specialised discourses*" – of, e.g. experts, academics etc. – with so-called "*elementary discourses*" embodying common-sense perceptions of normality. As a combination of those, Link argues, *interdiscourse* has emerged as a dominant format of public discourse. Given its "combinatory character" (ibid., 19; my translation), it has come to include elements of power-bearing, ideological discursive positions (including via the presence of expert definitions and opinions, statistics, economic facts etc) *as well as* mundane, everyday ideas about norms and normality (via distinctions etc). It has come to rest on a peculiar dialectic duality wherein specialised knowledge legitimises the introduction of elementary views and vice versa, thus, effectively, normalising both the former and the latter.

In their recent work on the spread of uncivil online discourses, Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017) looked at the normalization of radical and uncivil discourses in the wider online and offline public spheres. Departing from Link's model above, Krzyżanowski and Ledin argue that normalization entails the creation of a specific *borderline discourse*, which, while drawing on the affordances of established civil public discourses, essentially presents "uncivil" ideas related to unacceptable norms of social conduct – such as, e.g. racism, discrimination etc. – as legitimate and acceptable. The key point of this model is its focus on flexibility, and specifically its approach to discursive dynamics not being a unitary (i.e. running from A to B and thus for once changing/ breaking norms) but indeed a recursive and possibly repetitive process often initiated anew. This borderline discourse has therefore been viewed as a certain space in-between civil and uncivil expression and as a certain continuum of back and forth movements between wider spaces of civility and uncivility (ibid., 571). Those movements, it is claimed, allow the actors using them – e.g. uncivil society online, right-wing populist politicians etc. – to constantly remain on the verge of civility/ uncivility whilst strategically drawing on by now often clearly radical frames. These strategies, as Krzyżanowski and Ledin show, also originate in the ambiguity afforded by various frequent, strategic "frame shifts" (Goffman 1974) which allow writers/ speakers to oscillate in-between and on the verge of civil and uncivil norms. This helps to, e.g. normalise previously/ otherwise "unacceptable" discriminatory, xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric while using "acceptable" argumentation frames, such as those pertaining to public safety/ security, health or other ideas largely related to a wider rationality of modernity.

Finally, Wodak (2018) – who has also built extensively in her work on, e.g. Link's ideas – has dealt extensively with analyses of (right-wing) populist discourse and its wider impact on the normalization of radical-right views across the political spectrum (see also Wodak 2015, 2019). Unlike the views above, however, Wodak does not perceive normalization within the either vertical or horizontal logic of inter- or borderline discourse but views it as a relatively uniform *move* – specifically a "move to the right" (Wodak 2018, 333; my translation) – from acceptable to unacceptable normative positions in terms of the liberal-democratic order. Wodak argues that, in the course of normalization, "the frontiers of what can be said are moved, both as regards the frequency of untruths and the questioning or breaking of the discourse conventions" (ibid., 324; my translation). Wodak hence sees normalization from the point of view of the *accommodation* of discourses traditionally placed within the norms and moving towards discourses located outside such norms or even effectively undermining them (e.g. radical right in relation to wider political spectrum, etc). In doing so, Wodak emphasises the propensity of, in particular, right-wing populist parties as those which effectively carry a normalised discourse which successfully combines radical and accepted views. Wodak argues that whilst deploying many of the traditional right-wing populist discursive strategies – such as appeals to fears and anxieties, expressing untrue "facts", stigmatisation and scapegoating – contemporary right-wing populists effectively contribute to the spill-over effect of radical narratives and views. These, in turn, are carried by the once mainstream parties which gradually profit from their positions as both those who are accepted within the mainstream and those who, if needs be, are able to express more radical and (until recently) unacceptable ideas and views.

4. About this special issue

Building on the intellectual richness of the above approaches to normalization proposed in wider critical social research and in critical discourse and language studies, contributions to this Special Issue look at a variety of normalization processes in public discourse. The following papers do so while endorsing several of the claims outlined above and including, most commonly, those related to the path dependencies of normalization processes, to the centrality of classification/ distinction and stigmatization as well as to the role of pre-/legitimation and legitimation of normalising processes, including via the construction and communication of imaginaries of (post-normalization) order. By the same token, subsequent papers also operationalise views on the gradual and path-dependent nature of normalization processes, along with the creation of specific and often context-dependent normalization discourse (at both macro- and meso-/micro-levels) carrying the ambivalent introduction and pre-/legitimation of social norms, including many of the more specific linguistic and discursive strategies enumerated above.

The collection opens with a paper by Ester Pollack, who very clearly shows that various strategies of normalization are indeed historical in nature and not only a matter of recent and/or contemporary politics and public spheres. Pollack departs from the analysis of how the atrocities of the Holocaust were normalised in WWII Sweden, where a clear divergence could be observed between an NS-critical press – which was progressively silenced – and print media outlets which were not critical and often praised Nazi Germany politics. Pollack looks at, inter alia, strategies of silencing and omitting, which led to the fact that the Holocaust was largely missing from the Swedish wartime press, thus also creating an image of the Swedish public “not knowing” about the *Shoah*, indeed a fallacy that persisted for many years after WWII. In her analysis, which shows deep parallels between contextual and discursive dynamics, Pollack depicts that as structural constraints on talking about NS crimes against the Jews were introduced and imposed on Swedish newspapers that were not sympathetic to NS Germany, other newspapers that endorsed Hitler’s politics against the Jews effectively spoke about NS Germany but significantly silenced the plight of the Jewish population and the Holocaust in their discourse. This formed an overarching system wherein the Holocaust was, effectively, normalised by not only not being talked about in the Swedish wartime context, but where press laws and clandestine censorship were set up to control and restrain those media which could highlight the then ongoing Holocaust as one of the greatest tragedies in the history of mankind.

The focus remains on Sweden also in the second paper of the Special Issue where Mats Ekström, Joanna Thornborrow and Marianna Patrona analyse contemporary Swedish media and their attempts to normalise right-wing populist ideology. Focusing on news interviewing and specifically interviews with the leaders of the Swedish right-wing populist party, the Swedish Democrats, the article investigates the wider role of journalism in the normalization of radical right-wing politics and its discourses of nationalism and nativism. Using a discourse- and conversation analytical approach, the study shows an overall tendency of the media to normalize and legitimize the political views and language of the radical right via various distinctive practices, strategies and mechanisms. Among these, there are, inter alia, transformations in the socio-political landscape, the discursive strategies of political actors, the professional norms of journalism, and the discursive positioning of political views in news reporting. The study also highlights the challenges of

journalism, related to the normalizing implications of the restricted forms of impartiality applied in news journalism.

The look at politics and media interface also continues in the following paper by Antonio Reyes who looks at how the public discourse in contemporary Spain normalises ongoing state violence in Catalonia in the course of its struggle for independence and more specifically its 2017 independence referendum deemed “illegal” by the Spanish powers in Madrid. Reyes analyses the discourses of normalisation that were (re-) produced by the most widely read and influential paper in Spain, i.e. *El País*, where the actions of the police, such as beating and incapacitating unarmed citizens, were presented as a “normal” and inevitable option, even being defined as a constitutional and democratic measure. The paper explores how, in the months approaching the Catalan 2017 “referendum”, *El País* discursively constructed a case against Catalonia’s independence by (1) legitimizing views, ideologies and positions that consider the political positioning of the Catalan government unacceptable, (2) thereby excluding an option for dialogue and (3) propagating anti-pluralist discourses favouring “us” over “them”, which consequentially (4) normalised police force (on 1 October 2017) as a political intervention, justified by the application of article 155 from the Spanish Constitution.

In a paper which opens a set of contributions devoted to normalization in contemporary political discourses, Michał Krzyżanowski explores normalisation in the context of nativist and exclusionary right-wing populist politics in Central and Eastern Europe. Looking at mediated political discourses on immigration in Poland after 2015, Krzyżanowski presents a normalisation model which shows how radical – and often blatantly racist – discourse was not only strategically introduced to the public domain but also evolved into an acceptable and legitimate perspective in public perceptions of immigrants and minorities. Deploying his model, Krzyżanowski shows that the strategic as well as opportunistic introduction of anti-immigration rhetoric and “*moral panics*” in/by the political mainstream in Poland in recent years has largely coincided with the ensuing “Refugee Crisis” in Europe. He hence explores normalization as part and parcel of a wider multistep process of strategically orchestrated *discursive shifts* (Krzyżanowski 2013, 2018), wherein discourses characterised by extreme positions – specifically racism, discrimination and hate – have been *enacted, perpetuated and eventually normalised* as part and parcel of pronounced right-wing populist political strategies. Krzyżanowski also shows that normalization entails the creation of a new form of borderline discourse (Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017 and above). Therein, unmitigated radical statements are often married with civil, quasi-academic and politically correct language used to pre-/legitimise (Krzyżanowski 2014, 2016) effectively uncivil, radical and extremist positions and ideologies to make them look like rational and acceptable elements of increasingly exclusionary and nativist “common sense”.

The focus on normalization of nativism and exclusion in contemporary right-wing populism then moves to the US when, in the following paper, Frank Austermühl takes on the electoral discourses of Donald Trump. The main thesis of the article is that the language deployed by Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign, and disseminated via his public speeches and social media posts, was often characterised by the openly abusive, hateful, and nativist discourse stemming from of a political-strategic decision to create a winning coalition, a new/old covenant, of white Americans eager to reinstate a vision of a pre-diversity America. Austermühl argues that normalization of

exclusionary whiteness helped Trump win the presidency on the back of what the Washington Post called “the most racist, xenophobic, misogynistic campaign for president in memory.” As the paper shows, normalization of whiteness by Trump relied on a number of discursive strategies that supported the normalization of verbal behaviour – e.g. via the creation of fear, racialization, discrimination, stigmatization and de-stigmatization, scapegoating and victimization, othering and social exclusion – that was previously seen as either utterly unacceptable or at least politically incorrect. All of these strategies, it is shown, were used against the background of discursively constructed complex imaginaries of whiteness where the exclusion of un-American others in Trump’s campaign discourse was closely linked with an articulation of America as an expressly “white” nation.

In the following paper, Angela Smith and Michael Higgins remain in the focus on Donald Trump while looking at various layers of masculinity and hypermasculinity in the social media performances of the current US President. The authors discuss its implications for the normalisation of regressive forms of masculinity in public discourse, and look into the everyday expression of masculinity by Trump as well as his deployment of, e.g. concrete nouns such as “man” and “guy” to exercise gendered forms of judgement. They find this especially in the case in the informal nominations like “guy”, where Trump objectifies opponents on the basis of power-based oppositions within traditional masculinity. Building on these and other uses of masculinity in Trump’s tweets, Smith and Higgins explore the extent to which US President’s social media performance meets the criteria of “hypermasculinity.” They find that Trump is not only using traditional discourses of masculinity to objectify allies and opponents, but also draws upon this wider form of engagement to engage in hypermasculine discourse, thereby normalising an extended form of masculinity within hegemonic political culture.

The paper, which opens a section devoted to the normalization of neoliberalisation and economization of society, comes from Natalia Krzyżanowska, who critically explores how contemporary practices of commercialised self-mediation by “celebrity mothers” increasingly normalise a strongly commodified and consumption-driven vision of motherhood. Drawing on the affordances of mediatisation and self-mediation embedded in the wider neoliberal and celebrity culture mindset, the article analyses how motherhood becomes increasingly linked, in public discourses, to economic relations of acquiring or gaining material goods – rather than being viewed as a socially or individually significant process and role. Looking at mediated discourses in Sweden and Poland, Krzyżanowska shows how, over time, strong commodity and product orientation becomes a major feature characterising “good” mothers but also one a fundamental way of expressing contemporary maternal identities and emotions. However, in doing so, the ever more hegemonic discourse of the commodification of motherhood normalises the wider vision of motherhood as set within a strictly consumption-related mindset founded on social and material status – closely associated with an affluent middle-class – whilst ideologically and tacitly excluding women/ mothers who cannot follow discursively constructed celebrity-like lifestyles or patterns of consumption.

In the following paper which continues critique of normalization in the context of neoliberalism, David Cassels Johnson, Eric Johnson and Darrin Hetrick analyse the so-called linguistic deficit discourse. They look at the latter as it emerges in language gap research, gets appropriated by language gap foundations, and is reported as well as eventually

normalised in the media. Through intertextual analysis, the authors show how language deficit ideologies combine with neoliberal logic to normalize the marginalization of minoritized families, linguistic and sociolinguistic hierarchies, and the privileging of White middle-class (socio)linguistic norms. Language gap discourse turns parents into scapegoats by blaming them for the linguistic deficiencies of their children and low-income families are encouraged to misrecognize the inherent value of their communication abilities. In the process, social processes that engender economic and educational inequality are obfuscated. Rather than attempting to find real answers to real problems, language gap discourse emphasizes a quick fix solution (filling your kids up with words) instead of engaging with the real causes of educational inequity.

Finally, the paper which closes this Special issue looks at a very significant aspect of not only dealing with normalization in public discourse as, or if, it happens but also exploring post-normalization discourses that counteract hegemonic normalizing tendencies. In their paper which looks at the discourse of/about contemporary museums of migration mushrooming in many major European cities, Katja Pelsmaekers and Tom Van Hout argue that the newly set-up social heritage museums have attempted to counter the anonymous and stereotyped presentations of migrants widely normalized – especially in recent years (see above) in the public sphere. Drawing on the tension between media and museum representations of human mobility, the paper offers an in-depth look at what the authors call de-marginalization strategies in museum discourses of migration. Pelsmaekers and Van Hout argue that in contrast to contemporary news media and their predominantly “exclusionary” discourse (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2018), museums portray (e)migration enthusiastically, with varying degrees of sophistication, with strategies to generate involvement, empathy, and pleasurable experience. Historical actors and events are thereby stretched as well as compressed and essentialized into a phenomenon of people of all times everywhere. In this process of de-marginalization, however, museums and visitors also pay a price of differentiation and authenticity, often under the obvious pressures of neo-liberal economic conditions and particularly the exigencies of the experience economy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Research presented in this article was partially funded by Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskåpsrådet*) grant *Immigration and the Normalization of Racism: Discursive Shifts in Swedish Politics and Media 2010–22* (2019-03354).

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