

“DO YOUR HOMEWORK”: HEGEMONIC DISCOURSES ON WORK, IN THE TABLOID MEDIA, DURING THE EUROZONE CRISIS¹

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ABSTRACT

This article explores hegemonic discourses on productive work and labor, in the context of the Eurozone crisis. Based on the separation between creditor and debtor countries, often associated with Northern and Southern Europe, the coverage of the Portuguese legislative elections of 2011, in the online versions of two tabloid newspapers, the German Bild and the Portuguese Correio da Manhã, was analyzed. The analysis allowed us to identify a hegemonic discourse, transversal to both newspapers, that places work and the consequent accumulation of capital, as the central axis of valuing a society, dividing Europe into compliant (trustworthy) and non-compliant (untrustworthy) countries. In a few instances, we have identified a counter-hegemonic discourse, that values elements beyond productivity, calls into question the need for compliance, and places the root of the crisis in the very system that values development, as promoted in advanced capitalism.

KEYWORDS

Hegemony, Work, Eurozone crisis, Media Studies

In the context of postcolonial studies, solidified ideas about development, equated simply with indicators of economic growth, productivity, and efficiency, have been called into question from many angles (Shiva, 1988, Harris, 2008). However, within the European Union, or “the West”, the source of this idea of development, which it invented and exported (with more or less force) to the “rest” of world, the hegemonic vision of economic development in advanced capitalism (Braidotti, 2017), based on ideas about work ethics, prevails, even when public policies and welfare studies sometimes contradict this perspective (Penttilä, 2007). The hegemonic view is so robust that, even in countries seen as failures within this model, it continues to be accepted as a reference of value for societies, creating hierarchies within Europe.

Starting from the concepts of ideology and hegemony as developed by Stuart Hall (2016), from Marx (1932/1968), Althusser (1971/2014) and Gramsci (1971/1999), we focus on journalistic coverage, as a practice that has ideology as an object (Hall, 2016, p. 137). The media tend to reproduce hegemony, not only because of the narrative nature of journalistic texts, and the disguise of objectivity (Bird & Dardenne, 1999), but also because of the power of the so-called primary definers - the official sources to which more credibility is given (Hall et al., 1999).

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Media, being part of the hegemonic structures of a society, and at the same time part of counter-hegemonies, because they work as the “Fourth Estate”, are especially rich places in which to explore discourses about these issues (Hall, 2016). In the context of the sovereign debt crisis, which erupted in 2009, Europe, in the form of the European Union, or the Eurozone, which presented itself as a unified whole, broke out into several “europes”, developed along discourses about “us” and “them”. The most obvious political and economic cleavage divided Europe between trustworthy creditors and untrustworthy defaulters, quickly associated with a division between Northern and Southern Europe. Thus, in this study, we focus on the contexts of Portugal and Germany as representative of these “two Europes” (Lourenço, 1988) – a dichotomy which was not born in this crisis.

In addition to the North-South geographic referent, this division found another line of separation: the non-compliant debtor countries are found in the Catholic or non-Protestant Europe (PIIGS), and the abiding creditors in a Protestant Europe - a line already used by Weber (1930/2005) in the search for the cultural origin of capitalism, which he found in the Protestant work ethic. The influence of the Reformation on the ideologies and pervasive discursive hegemonies in contemporary Europe is undeniable. Even though the Lutheran influence is not the focus of this present work, it is a referral worth mentioning, especially when it comes to speeches about work and leisure, in an era in which value, relevance, even dignity, are measured by economic indicators - a view closely related to the “development” models that put countries on a spectrum of evolution according to allegedly neutral standards.

Thus, in a context in which economic and financial success is the measure of the triumph and validity of a societal model, discourses about “us” and “them” transform communities into valid or invalid, worthy or not of respect, through the economic indicators they present, which are often simply attributed to questions of “backwardness” and “development” that is, states of evolution. And in the European context, Germany, led by Angela Merkel, has undoubtedly emerged as a leader, Beck having even coined the term “Merkiavel” to illustrate the German chancellor’s leadership style (Beck, 2014).

The Hegemony of Productivity in the Media

The empirical analysis carried out in this study allowed us to identify this hegemonic vision, both in Portugal and in Germany, which places productive labor and the consequent accumulation of capital as the central axis of valorization of a society, dividing Europe into trustworthy creditors and untrustworthy debtors. At times, we have identified a counter-hegemonic vision that values elements beyond productivity, calls into question the need for compliance, and places the root of the crisis in the very system that values development, in its traditional meaning.

In this article, we focus on so-called tabloid journalism, a type of popular journalism, made up primarily of short stories and paragraphs and simple sentences, with a greater focus on the emotional side of the news (DFJV, na, Público, Comunicação SA, 1998), represented here by the German Bild Zeitung, and by the Portuguese newspaper Correio da Manhã, in their online versions. The data was collected according to a strategic time selection, around the resignation of the Portuguese Government on March 23rd 2011, and the ensuing legislative elections in Portugal on June 5th 2011, with two different methods, taking into account

the relationship of the newspaper under analysis to the electoral context. Thus, the time period for the collection of news at Bild was: 23 -24.03.2011; 14.05 - 06.06.2011; 05.07.2011, and in the *Correio da Manhã*: 23.03-24.03.2001; 30.05-06.06.2011; 07.05.2011. For each of the newspapers, the collection began with an online search through the search engine Google, according to strategically selected keywords⁴, completed by the internal search engines of each website. The most relevant articles were selected to perform a content analysis (Bardin, 2007), leading to the analysis of 33 articles from *Correio da Manhã* and 15 articles from Bild.

The Hegemony of the German Success Model

In the hegemonic view identified in this article, Germany, often personified in the individual of Chancellor Angela Merkel, emerges as the undeniable model to follow, the leader of Europe, since it is the economically strongest country. Here, however, we find a difference between the representation in the Portuguese newspaper compared to the German newspaper, since, in the former, Merkel tends to emerge as the leader who dominates Europe, with a power equivalent or superior to that of the European institutions, whilst in the latter, Germany is generally presented in a position of equality with the other Member States, with the European institutions dominating, and Merkel only a benevolent leader who wants to “save the Euro”.

One of the examples, present in both newspapers, and repeated in several moments of the analysis, is the use of the expression “doing their/our homework”, as in the opinion piece signed by a CDS (right-wing) politician (Félix, 2011), in which the author equates Germany’s power with that of the European institutions: “Now, it’s even governmentally fashionable to do our homework ... away from home. In other words, from house to house, in a German or a Brusseleair house” (idem).

In “Olhai e Grecia - e fugi!” (“Look at Greece – and run!”) (Guerreiro, 2011), the author, a journalist, conveys a discourse centered on a self-image of Portugal as a weak country of potential defaulters, part of Europe’s “weakest links”: “Europe does not know what to do to its weakest links and there is the temptation to simply drop them: to exclude from the Eurozone” (idem).

Although it only appears as a secondary part of the main news piece (*Correio da Manhã*, 2011), under the heading “Europeus do Sul trabalham mais do que alemães” (“Southern Europeans work more than the Germans”), one of the most directly relevant articles to explore the hegemonic discourses at play is found, since it does not question the hegemonic view, it simply claims that the countries of the South work harder, thus, are even more valid:

“Southern Europeans work much more, and sometimes longer, than the Germans,” says a study that runs counter to the recent statements by the German chancellor about possible social laxity in Portugal, Spain or Greece. “

In the opinion piece “A anedota da Europa” (“The joke of Europe”) (Coutinho, 2011), the author adopts a derogatory tone on Portugal, seeking validation in the external gaze, not

⁴ German: Portugal, Portugiesen, Portugiesin, Portugiesisch, Südeuropa, Südeuropäer, Europa
Portuguese: Alemanha, alemão, alemã, alemães, “Europa do Norte”, “europeu do norte”, “europeus do norte”, Europa



directly from Germany, but from Europe, who sees Portugal as a “one-horse town” (“parvo-
nia”), as a country worthy even to be ridiculed: “Portugal will cease to be just another poor
and irresponsible country on the periphery. It will certainly be Europe’s biggest joke”.

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In addition to articles referring to football (in the figure of Cristiano Ronaldo) and the
beauty of Praia da Marinha, which helps to associate the country to leisure activities, most
of the articles mentioning Portugal in the coverage of Bild revolve around the crisis. Espe-
cially interesting, in the article about the Portuguese parliamentary elections, is the use of
language associated with disease and health in financial terms (Bild, 2011). The title itself
indicates: “Wahlsieger Coelho will Portugal gesundsparen” (“Winner of the election Coelho
wants save Portugal to health”). Portugal is, not only in this article, often described as a
“highly indebted country” (idem).

In the article “Griechen verhöhnen Europa ... und kriegen neue Milliarden” (“Greeks ri-
dicule Europe ... and receive new millions”) (Ronzheimer & Schuler, 2011), the framing of
the issue is immediately visible in the title itself, which questions whether the protests in
Greece would be a waste of the Europeans’ “willingness to help”. Although the article is not
directly on Portugal, but on Greece, both countries are often referenced together in the con-
text of the crisis. The response to the protests is sought in German sources, whose statements
appear as imperatives, and demand that the standards of Central Europe, i.e. the German
model, be met⁵:

“Volker Kauder (CDU - Merkel’s party) has now spoken clearly with BILD: “Greece is strug-
gling, but their efforts are not enough, **we have to guide Greece with a firm hand** in the
path of solidity. Greece needs to make even greater savings efforts.” (idem)

“A clear message to the demonstrators: “We should not be impressed by demonstrations
in Greece: Greece must **finally become a state with Central European standards**, only then
will we prevent Europe from dying.” (ibidem)

In the article “Griechen sollen weniger Urlaub machen” (“Greeks should do less vaca-
tion”) (Bild, 2011) the newspaper reports on how Merkel “provoked” Portuguese and Greeks,
and put “Druck” (pressure) on “Europas Schuldensünder” (European debt sinners). Interes-
ting is also the use of language associated with religion, and the association of debt to sin.
Merkel is once again represented as being in the position of the one who dictates the rules
of the game: “It is also important that people cannot retire sooner than in Germany, in coun-
tries like Greece, Spain, Portugal, but that everyone struggles a little in the same way - this
is important. (...) We cannot have a single currency, where the one can have many vacation
days and the other very few” (ibidem). The call also comes from German Finance Minister
Wolfgang Schäuble: “The Economic and Monetary Union was not created to be a system of
redistribution from rich Member States to poor ones” (ibidem). The actual facts about vaca-
tion days and retirement age are not verified.

In an interview with Chancellor Angela Merkel (Blome & Draxler, 2011), a division be-
tween the newspaper’s framing of the crisis and the stance adopted by the political leader
becomes evident. However, the hegemonic vision of the importance of German supremacy,

⁵ Expressions placed in bold by the authors, for emphasis

as a strong country that helps the weak countries, and as a savior of Europe, remains in both perspectives:

BILD: When the crisis fund emerges permanently, can we still speak of a distinction between the Eurozone and a “transfer Union”, where **the strong have to constantly help the weak**? Merkel: “Germany has been, and is, available to **help the weakest**, as we demonstrate every year with our contributions to the EU budget. But, with me, there will be no transfer union. Each country is responsible for its own debt. But Germany, like all other countries, has an interest in the stability of the Euro as a whole. Therefore, the Crisis Fund will only grant loans in emergency situations and **under strict conditions** - loans which, of course, are repayable. Germany can, therefore, use its **veto power** if the conditions for aid are not met, I will also make use of it” (idem)

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In the same interview, an appeal to diligence is renewed, in the paternalistic tone underlying the education language, when Merkel is quoted saying: “Some countries in the monetary union have not **done their homework** for years. This is what these countries are now compensating for, and the Competitiveness Pact will provide political guidance “ (ibidem).

The Counter-Hegemonic Alternatives

In the instances in which we identified a counter-hegemonic discourse, in the case of the Portuguese newspaper, we have sometimes found a representation of Angela Merkel as the dominant leader, but without recognizing the legitimacy of this leadership, and there are even moments where we found a discourse of hatred or rancor.

It is also relevant to understand the moments in which the counter-hegemonic discourses emerge in both newspapers. In *Correio da Manhã*, they essentially appear during the coverage and comments of what we call the “Case of the Cucumbers”, when there is a failure on the part of the German authorities, which seems to open a space for overt criticism of the whole hegemonic vision of the country’s model’s supremacy, and arises essentially through entire articles, which are written in the counter-hegemonic vision. They are also written mainly by left-wing politicians or journalists from the newspaper itself. In the German newspaper, fragments of counter-hegemonic discourses appear throughout the articles which also reinforce the hegemony, often as a counterpoint to the hegemonic vision. This, however, can also be explained by the fact that many of the articles analyzed in *Correio da Manhã* are opinion pieces, where contradiction and the search for objectivity are not necessary (Bird & Dardenne, 1999), and in *Bild*, they are exclusively pieces of hard news, in which there are journalistic routines seeking an alleged journalistic objectivity.

In a short interview in *Correio da Manhã* with a member of the POUS (a left-wing opposition party) (*Correio da Manhã*, 2011), we find two divergent discourses on the debt issue: one reflected in the journalist’s question and the other in the respondent’s response:

“- How do we **pay what we owe**?

- We don’t owe. We have not made this debt. The debt is the debt of speculators and is imposed on us.” (idem)



The question reflects a common discourse in the context of the crisis, which is that of representing Portugal as a non-compliant debtor, underlying the expression “pay what we owe”. The interviewee places the emphasis on responsibility not on non-compliant countries but on the financial sector. This discourse of the interviewee also leads to a totally counter-hegemonic grouping of identities, based on the rejection of the system itself: it is not a question of German “them” and Portuguese “us”, but of a class division that transcends borders: “The key issue is to unite workers across Europe against the Euro” (ibidem).

In another opinion piece, by a member of the PS (center-left) (Cabrita, 2011), we highlight the blaming of “wild liberalism” and populism, as well as of the “global crisis of 2008” for the situation in Portugal. Once again, the author of the leftist political wing, puts the blame on liberalism, and criticizes austerity: “Portugal is in an unequal fight against time to prove the failure of revenue followed in Greece and Ireland” (idem).

In addition to the articles on various topics relating to the crisis, that allow us to explore these counter-hegemonic discourses, there was a particularly caricatural news event that was also extremely relevant: the case of cucumbers contaminated with E.Coli. In May 2011, an outbreak of the E.coli bacteria in Hamburg, Germany, was presented by the German authorities as having had a probable origin in cucumbers from Spain, allegations that turned out not to be corroborated by laboratory results. In the Portuguese media, various reports on the case, which refer repeatedly to “Spanish cucumbers”, and to the precipitousness of the German authorities, include references to Portuguese and Spanish farmers who are “angry at the Germans”, creating an underlying cleavage by nationalizing the issue. In addition to these references, the event was also the subject of several opinion pieces that clearly and explicitly exploit its symbolism: “The speculative crisis created in Europe a tendency of suicidal selfishness that manifests itself from the euro crisis to the tragedy of the allegedly Spanish cucumbers allegedly” (Cabrita, *Os Passos da Crise*, 2011), or, in a similar tone, another opinion piece:

“The unfortunate episode in Germany of blaming the new strain of the bacterium on Spanish cucumbers is a sign of these times when the idea of European social cohesion gives way to stupid national egoisms, where prejudices prevail” (Pereira, 2011)

This opinion piece contains several references to the power of the European Union, and Germany, personified in the figure of Angela Merkel: “The most important questions about our future are already decided more in Berlin or in Frankfurt, seat of the ECB, than in Lisbon. And judging from the way this Europe leads, the prediction is not good” (idem).

In a regular column, in which a journalist from the newspaper highlights and makes short comments on the week’s top news, under the subtitle “A fuga: Leve pepinos para Berlim” (“The Escape: Take cucumbers to Berlin”), the tone of confrontation, even with some violence, is not disguised:

“The trip is cheap and patriotic. Take the plane to Madrid, buy some beautiful Spanish cucumbers, hide them in the suitcase and leave quickly for Berlin. When you get to the capital of Germany, try everything to see Ms. Merkel and offer her the cucumbers. With any luck, you will Portugal from certain bankruptcy” (Ferreira, 2011)

A militant of Bloco de Esquerda (left-wing party) also signs an opinion piece titled “Grande pepineira” (“What a cucumbery”) (Dias, 2011) where the following is written: “The killer cucumber is a good symbol of the state of Europe. Faced with E.coli infections, Germany decided, without proof, to blame the Spanish product” (idem).

In a similar tone, in the article “Coliforme Merkel” (“Coliform Merkel”) (Catarino, 2011), the author uses irony to also criticize the German leadership on Europe and to satirize discourses about Southern-European countries:

“The fortress commanded by Angela Merkel discovered, terrified, an invasion by legions of E.coli - a bacterium horrified of soap and disinfectant. It could only come from **the barbarians of the South**. German intestines, accustomed to sausages, pork and red cabbage sauerkraut, are a small bottle of rose water. Unlike the Spaniards, Portuguese, Greeks and even Italians - who put public health at serious risk. “(Idem)

The article continues with references to representations of the German leadership:

“I do not know what is worse - whether the bacterium against which medicine has its weapons, or the deep **contempt of Mrs. Angela for us all**. What really threatens Europe is not simply E.coli, but a new species called E.coli.merkel. This is what is killing us. The strain spreads unstopably. Either we get an antidote - or we will not survive the pandemic of this E.coli.merkel” (ibidem)

In the German newspaper, a distancing from the hegemonic discourse by Angela Merkel is to be found, in the aforementioned interview (Blome & Draxler, 2011). Namely, a rejection of the discourse of victimization of German taxpayers and the view of Germany as an indisputable model of Europe on all fronts. This, in turn, contributes to her representation as a benevolent leader, while the newspaper’s own question denotes a division between “well” and “badly” behaved countries. Once again, it is a question of “doing their homework”, that is, doing what is required according to the right model of behavior, following externally defined guidance:

“BILD: Can you understand that many Germans feel like the “**idiots of Europe?**” We did the necessary reforms, but the others did not ...

Merkel: First of all, we must never forget how much we Germans benefit politically and economically from Europe. But we also see that some countries of the monetary union **have not done their homework** for years, which is what these countries are now compensating for (...) But **we are not the best at everything**. Think about the issues of vacancies in kindergartens or our rate of people with degrees. That is where we can learn a lot from other EU countries” (idem).

Also in the aforementioned article on vacation days and the retirement age in the South (Bild, 2011), there is a concern with consulting a Portuguese source for comment, without, however, verifying the facts:

“The chancellor’s criticism provoked outrage and protests in Portugal, which is at risk of bankruptcy. “This is **pure colonialism,**” reprimanded the president of the CGTP union, Manuel Carvalho da Silva, which lacks “any solidarity.”” (idem)



Moving Beyond Linearity

The analysis presented here allows us to explore, in a preliminary way, the way in which work ethics and the resulting economic success are hegemonically presented as hierarchical referents of different societies, sustaining relations of power with undeniable political, economic and social consequences, and serving as justification for public policies at all scales. The traditional development model, with its focus on economic indicators, is still hegemonically accepted, with consequences even inside of the European framework.

This brief study, also allows us to raise the veil on how this same hierarchy can lead to discourses of hetero- and auto-depreciation and devaluation of entire societies, as well as, as a retaliation, leading even to violent speeches of resentment, creating cleavages that are obstacles to cosmopolitan community and solidarity projects.

The role of the media as a vehicle and actor in the construction of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, being a privileged place in which to identify and understand the hegemonies and ideologies that underlie a society, in its discursive and material elements, is evident today. Its potential in the deconstruction and questioning of hegemonic, and even counter-hegemonic, discourses can be crucial, if awareness about the hegemonies and even ideologies that cross prevailing discourses is raised.

Since this study is only preliminary, it would benefit from further research, including the analysis of non-tabloid newspapers, in order to perceive if the same hegemonies are present in more mitigated and less sensationalist discourses. It could also be enhanced by expanding the temporal incidence of analysis, in order to encompass a more recent historical period, when political changes in Europe seem to indicate a shift in hegemonic discourses on productivity, especially on the austerity side, and other “crises” seem to be at play, as is the case with the “migration crisis”.

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