Introduction to the special issue: Rhetorical approaches to contemporary political studies

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue on Rhetorical Approaches to Contemporary Political Studies. It underscores the importance of innovations in political speech as a key to the continuing attraction of scholars to rhetorical methods. This is particularly relevant at a moment of crisis and disruption in established democracies when the parameters of acceptable discourse have been brought into question by forms of 'post-truth' politics. Although controversial, such efforts affirm the value of rhetorical analysis as a mode of political enquiry. The article then sketches the arguments of the contributions to the issue.

Politics, as Aristotle reminds us, is an activity that relies, fundamentally, on the human capacity for speech. As he says in Book I of *The Politics*:

> the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and the inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state. (Aristotle, 1988: 1214–1220)

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This observation is as true now as it was in antiquity. In public debates and announcements, electoral campaigns, rallies and official ceremonies, policies, and their justifications, political life *as such* is inseparable from practices and institutions of human speech – a term that encompasses not merely words and texts but performances, gestures, and emotions that give concrete expression to ideas, values, and personalities. It is in speech, too, that personal skills, styles, and careers, as well as ideological traditions and innovations, find their primary medium. Yet, such is the ubiquity of speech and language in democratic politics that it is easy to lose sense of the ways, they operate in different contexts, the forces they can mobilise, and the transformations they can set in motion, both for society and for politics itself. The power and impact of speaking is hard to gauge, let alone 'measure', because language constitutes both the object and the medium of analysis, making it hard to separate an independent 'reality' from its interpretation (see Blakely, 2020).

This special issue is devoted to rhetorical approaches to the study of contemporary politics. Although the rhetorical tradition reaches back to antiquity, our concern here is with how language, speech, and argument in politics today can be illuminated by its insights. Rhetorical analysis usefully alerts us to the distinctive techniques of speech and performance that figure public meaning and give force to ideas. Rhetorical enquiry's roots in the humanistic study of speech distinguish it from positivist-inspired approaches to communications or linguistics, which often seek to approximate causal explanation or the abstract law-like models of the natural sciences. In being attuned to the concrete rather than universal 'shapes' of language and meaning, and to the communicative strategies that enact them, rhetorical analysis is vital to the study of political figures and speeches, public controversies, and parliamentary customs. In the United States, for example, a long and rich tradition of rhetorical enquiry has focussed attention on the speech of the Presidency (see Campbell and Jamieson, 2008; Tulis, 1987 also, the Special Issue on 'Elections, rhetoric and American foreign policy in the age of Donald Trump' in this journal). In Europe, rhetorical traditions have been less influential in political science, but they strongly inform hermeneutical and historical studies of politics (see Kjeldsen and Grue, 2011; Skinner, 2002). Indeed, as the dominance of positivism continues to recede, rhetorical types of political enquiry are, increasingly, a point of reference for the contemporary study of politics, whether of an empirical or theoretical inclination (see, for example, Atkins et al., 2014; Crines et al., 2016; Grube, 2013; Martin, 2014; Wiesner et al., 2017).

What accounts for this persistent attraction to rhetoric? Arguably, a key aspect of rhetorical enquiry is its attention to *innovations* in speech rather than to generic or routine features of discourse. As a source of pedagogic instruction – and, therefore, a treasured, practical knowledge (or 'art') for political actors and their speech writers (see Kjeldsen et al., 2019) – rhetorical scholarship has always inclined to grasping the specific choices of words for particular audiences in distinct situations. It acknowledges the commonplace and the conventional, of course, but frequently as a backdrop to clarifying the options available to an individual speaker seeking to enliven or even transform public discourse. Rhetoricians, therefore, regularly explore moments of crisis and disruption, where routine types of speech and argument no longer give confidence to audiences. Such moments in social and political life – which doubtless vary in duration and intensity – throw up opportunities for invention in speech; the introduction of new phrases and arguments (often encapsulated in slogans), the redefinition of terms and categories to expand or retract meaning, to encapsulate formerly unacknowledged attitudes, and the deployment of

notable metaphors that serve to recast the landscape. Such innovations may well draw upon wider ideological constellations or pre-existing and long-held beliefs. But, in their moment, they can arrive with a force that suddenly captures attention and cuts through the impenetrable mist of conventional discourse.

In recent years, episodes of crisis and disruption have given us some notable rhetorical moments; from Brexit to the Trump presidency, the growing climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the #metoo movement, or the resurgence of protest around Black Lives Matter following the killing of George Floyd in the United States, to name only a few. Each episode comes with its own repertoire of phrases or techniques of argument, unfolds as the discrediting of an identified misdeed for which great resentment is aroused (Engels, 2015), and announces demands for a policy to resolve it, usually by commissioning leadership with a new set of priorities. On these occasions, public attention may dwell on the meaning and significance of a new vocabulary or phraseology, the question of just how effective this language might be, and to what extent it mirrors the practical demands of the moment or the deeper preoccupations of the personalities who employ it.

Rhetorical moments such as these signal the periodic intrusion into public space of provocative, perhaps unanswerable questions that problematise existing institutions and choices (see Meyer, 2017; Turnbull, 2014). Can the United States be 'great' again? Can Britain regain its sovereign independence by leaving the European Union (EU)? Can the climate crisis be effectively tackled? Such questions never adequately capture all aspects of a situation. Nonetheless, they crystallise discontent into handy slogans and amenable dispositions, disrupt the rhythm of established political habits, and call into doubt the solidity of cherished assumptions. Rhetoric, we might say, is the art of resetting agendas.

Or, at very least, unsettling them. In recent years, rhetorical disruption has earned its own label with the much-repeated term 'post-truth politics', employed to characterise political cultures in which emotion and deliberate distortion – rather than accepted facts and claims supported by authoritative evidence – form a central strand in public media and political communications strategies (see Farkas and Schou, 2020; Seargeant, 2020). From accusations of 'fake news' by former President Trump, the vituperative demonisation of opponents, hyperbolic over-promising of results, to the deployment of conspiracy theories and other such falsehoods across social media to intensify 'populist' mobilisations of discontent against establishment targets (see Rolfe, 2016), talk of post-truth conjurs an unsettling image of communications gone rogue. There is some debate as to the origins and validity of this way of characterising politics, and the term mobilises a moral critique that might be directed at any number of culprits (including those who deploy it). But it is undoubted that post-truth points us at the currently fraught rhetorical landscape in established democracies.

Hannah Arendt argued that politics and 'truth' have never mixed well; there are many types of truth and political discourse is rarely the best medium to discuss them (Arendt, 2000). Contemporary references to post-truth illuminate not so much a new condition – people have always lied, exaggerated, and deceived in politics – but, more fundamentally, the erosion of the wider horizon inside which democratic politics has operated, thereby holding politics and truth in *some* kind of ongoing conversation. As a consequence, the standards that constrain speech no longer carry the recognition they once did. Yet, what good is democratic speech if we cannot agree the basic purpose of democracy itself? If all speech generates incandescent outrage, if expertise no longer counts as a marker of authority, if people cannot hold public institutions effectively to account, then what faith

can they have in public speech at all? The boundaries between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, shared interests and partisanship all begin to dissolve, exposed as mere customs to be discarded when it suits. In such circumstances, public confidence is sought not by referencing norms and conventions that affirm reciprocity between adversaries but, increasingly, by their blatant transgression and mutual accusations of the illegitimacy of the other (see Mouffe, 2000). The widely sensed hostility and division felt in many democracies of late, the readiness to invoke conspiracies, promote empty slogans, and the willingness simply to mislead and lie, have generated febrile rhetorical environments unconducive to civil engagement but ideal for demagoguery (see Mercieca, 2020; Roberts-Miller, 2017).

Some might claim the post-truth scenario is precisely the terrain of rhetoric itself – with rhetoric understood as the cynical manipulation of popular feelings with scant regard for basic facts, evidence, and argument. But, as we show in the articles that follow, that would limit rhetoric only to the most egregious and divisive types of communication, with little attention being given to other, often more positive aspects and styles of rhetoric. It would also prevent us from understanding politics as a practice of invention that – however, controversial or negative it may at times be – operates by way of creatively (if undoubtedly selectively) refashioning the possibilities available in any political situation. In current circumstances, understanding what kinds of rhetoric are at work in contemporary politics, how they function, and how we might engage them is, arguably, a vital necessity.

The contributions to this special issue begin, then, from the assumption that rhetorical enquiry offers resources to grasp the innovative and creative dimension of politics. While each author(s) takes up an empirical theme or issue specific to their own interests, all underline how rhetorical approaches to politics entail a distinct method of enquiry that can illuminate the object in question. That way, we have sought to make clear to students and scholars unfamiliar with rhetoric what each of us believe is the advantage a focus on rhetoric can bring to political analysis.

In their contribution to the issue, Johnson and Stuckey (2020) propose that rhetorical analysis illuminates our understanding of the Trump presidency and the changes he has brought to it as a communicative institution. Approaching metaphorically rather than literally the two interlocking motifs that animated Trump's rhetoric in his announcement speech, namely the wall and the presidency as business, Johnson and Stuckey shift the emphasis from questions of policy (and therefore, questions of feasibility) to 'the symbolic structure' of Trump's campaign and presidency. Their analysis sheds light on the symbolic changes Trump represents: the institution of the presidency as a business (which entails, among other things, the neo-liberalisation of immigration) and the promotion of an exclusionary vision of American national identity. A metaphorical study of Trump's public speech, Johnson and Stuckey argue, reveals the economic and racial logics that underpinned his administration in ways that other methods of analysis cannot.

Public speech, broadly construed, is also the focus of Martin's (2020) article. He begins by attending to the hermeneutics of public speech, that is, to its meaning-making function within the context of a specific situation. Martin's concern is primarily with the temporal dimensions of public speaking; its preoccupation with an immediate, practical situation, or 'exigence' (as opposed to abstract or universal meanings) that the speaker seeks to interpret for audiences in order to orient their responses. A hermeneutic approach brings Martin to affirm public speech as a symbolic practice that intervenes in and eventually shapes time; it is a 'structured temporal economy' that organises meaning not only

in the present but also in the audiences' memory. Ultimately, this double feature of public speech (as both timely and untimely) underlines the role of rhetoric in shaping the future (in Derrida's sense of an 'absolute future') and how audiences choose to confront it. A rhetorical approach to public speech, Martin shows, alerts us to the ethical and political possibilities and responsibilities emerging within discursive action.

Hatzisavvidou's (2020) contribution considers the situated forms that discourse takes within the antagonistic realm of politics. She suggests that rhetorical analysis can clarify the object, source, and terms of public disputes, as well as illuminate how agents of persuasion seek to promote their political projects, reinforcing, or challenging sedimented ideological positions. Hatzisavvidou proposes that analysts of public discourse find useful commonplaces, a rhetorical tool that spotlights regularities that guide collective judgement in the otherwise uncertain and fragmented terrain of politics. She illustrates this function through a study of the debate on climate action as it is manifest in British party manifestos. The article underlines a number of key points; it reveals the prominent position that 'economic growth' has in climate policy in the United Kingdom, highlights the availability of alternative ideas, and calls into attention the link between terms used in disputes about climate action and broader debates on socio-ecological transformation.

Turnbull and Broad (2020) are concerned with rhetoric as a means to construct and explain public problems to audiences. They focus on the multifaceted issue of modern slavery and human trafficking which, they suggest, loses its complexity in public debates. Through an examination of the rhetoric employed by UK non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the issue, Turnbull and Broad demonstrate how a rhetorical approach to the analysis of contemporary anti-slavery discourse can clarify the nature of the problem. The historical evolution of this discourse shows why rhetoric matters for how audiences receive policy problems, how particular rhetorical forms can negotiate distance in regard to such problems and, ultimately, what constitutes effective persuasion when what is at stake is the disposition of an audience towards a public issue.

Audience reception is also the focus of Atkins (2021), who considers how 'the British people' have been (re)defined since 2016 in the context of Brexit debates. Atkins proposes that a rhetorical approach to an audience's reception of speech can reveal key tensions; points of antagonism and exclusion that open space for both public identification and criticism. Her analysis explores how Prime Minister, Theresa May's, epideictic rhetoric appealed to an imagined audience of Leave voters that she conflated with the British people in general. This undermined her efforts to create and promote national unity and to offer a compelling vision of Britain after Brexit. A rhetorical analysis, Atkins demonstrates, can help us understand why some conceptions of community ('the people', 'the nation') gain traction with audiences, whereas others fail.

Dillet (2020) draws our attention to social media and its role in giving form to rhetoric. His primary concern is the difference between this sphere of action and the public sphere, a difference he suggests that underscores how technology shapes rhetorical situations. Bringing together rhetorical and critical algorithm studies, Dillet argues that technology, data, and algorithms are far from neutral mechanisms. He shows how the encounter of speech and social media platforms contribute to the fragmentation of the existing rhetorical culture. His analysis usefully expands the scope of rhetorical analysis and underscores the need to consider algorithms (along with context, argument, and effects) when studying rhetorical situations in the sphere of social media.

Their differences notwithstanding – or precisely because of them – the articles in this special issue remind us of the richness of rhetorical studies and the diverse ways it might

inform our understanding of innovation in political life. Through its emphasis on the situatedness as well as constitutive force of speech, rhetorical enquiry attends to the contestable and contextual nature of political claims; and it offers a wealth of tools to inform our knowledge of social reality. If it does not seek 'causal' explanations between public speech and historical facts, nonetheless rhetorical enquiry assists in the study of specific political episodes, linking them to broader social and ideological events, and the futures these portend. In this way, rhetorical approaches enable analysts to navigate the ambiguous choices of politics and to highlight the inventive 'power of speech', as Aristotle put it, in tackling them.

Authors' Note

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