

FORMATS 2

Recovering argumentation in the era of mass media

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Classical Greece is one of the periods in time in which rhetoric constituted one of the keys in the public, democratic life that characterized the Greek *polis*. Diversified into three genres -legal, deliberative, and epideictic- it covered all aspects of the public existence of Greek citizens. This was the most brilliant period for this discipline, as it was used as a tool of persuasion in discussing political problems in public squares and courts. But with the passage of time rhetoric fell into disuse and was considered a negative, superfluous feature that only manipulated the souls of those who cared to listen as opposed to something that contributed to public discussion.

The purpose of this article is to briefly define the causes of the splendor and fall of rhetoric as the art of persuasion with words. We will defend the position that we currently need to recover some of the aspects of rhetoric that are shown to be valid for democratic exchange via the mass media.

1. The period of splendor: rhetoric at the center of public life

During classical times not only were the basic aspects of rhetoric developed, but there was also major philosophical debate about its usefulness as an element of political and legal discussion. In fact, rhetoric is born as a legal phenomenon with a strong political component in Syracuse in the 5th century B.C., when a democratic rebellion overthrew the tyrants Gelon and Hieron, who had seized a great deal of property to hand it over to their mercenaries. Their fall brought with it the beginning of a series of trials to recover the seized land. Corax and his pupil Tisias taught rhetoric to anyone who needed to become involved in these trials. Their rhetoric was based on practical precepts that were rather different from the philosophical idea of searching for truth that would be developed by the Sophists, since the judges were not interested in abstract truths but rather accuracy, the decisions valid for each trial.

Rhetoric is consolidated in the framework of the Greek polis, and more specifically in Athens. The Sophists appeared in this atmosphere of freedom. In Barelli's (1989) opinion, their appearance marks the first major event in the history of rhetoric since they created an epistemological, timeless, and ethical model that covered significant gaps in Greek civilization, such as the organization of the main educational organizations and the development of a critical spirit (Robrieux, 1993). Although the Sophists contributed much to the advancement of rhetoric as a science, it is also true

that their name is identified with a very negative part of rhetoric as it separated itself from ethics understood as a defense of absolute truth.

Plato (428 - 347 BC) (1) was a sworn enemy of the Sophists, whom he criticized for making opinion more important than truth. In fact, what Plato was talking about was the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy, which in his mind were entirely different from one another. Despite his anti-Sophist view, his position on rhetoric was not completely negative. He differentiated two rhetorics: one, that of the Sophists, had negative connotations because it attempted to persuade at any price with no consideration for intellectual honesty; and two, a positive type of rhetoric interested in dialectics and in the search for truth that helped to shape spirits.

At this point there then appeared one of the key figures in the history of rhetoric, Aristotle (384 - 322 BC). Aristotle distinguishes two quite different areas: on the one hand, there is science in which proofs have to be based on certainty and truth, and on the other, there is persuasive discourse, which argues for something that is probable, something that is likely. Science, since it is based on truth, tries to convince a universal audience with the same reasoning, whereas persuasive discourse uses proof not to persuade everyone in the same way but rather does so in relation to the nature of the audience.

We thus see differences between types of reasoning and differences according to the type of public the discourse is addressed to. Depending on the audience the various types of rhetoric, legal, epideictic and deliberative, arise. Legal discourse is addressed to the Courts and deals with defending or accusing in relation to justice or injustice, and, as Robrieux (1993:16) states, the reasoning must be more rigorous because the audience is highly educated. According to him the deliberative genre is geared towards assemblies that make decisions following democratic rules and which must decide about the future in function of usefulness or a lack thereof. Finally, the epideictic genre uses praise or blame of people and ideas by basing itself on the values of prettiness or ugliness.

Rhetoric reaches the Romans through the Greeks. Maintenance of the art of rhetoric in Imperial Rome is connected to the various forms of government. It flourishes with the Republic, but when the Republic falls, it declines. Since there were no democratic forms of political organization, rhetoric no longer defended real opposition positions and turned into ornamental, senseless discourse.

2. The decline: rhetoric becomes removed from real political content

Starting with the fall of Imperial Rome rhetoric progressively declines until the mid-20th century. From the Middle Ages onward, rhetoric evolved divided into two types: on the one hand there was the more argumentative rhetoric, and, on the other, there was the more elocutionist style. Argumentative rhetoric entered into a critical situation from the very beginning, and that resulted into rhetoric being developed as an art of

wittiness, with no philosophical foundation or basis in sense. The division in these two types of rhetoric reached its highest point during the Renaissance, when nothing new was contributed and what occurred was simply further development of the classics.

In the 18th century rhetoric had already waned to the point that it is not hard to understand its stagnation. Contributing to its definitive fall (up to its present recovery) were certain social and cultural factors such as illustrated despotism, which was only interested in affirmative rhetoric, and the rise of a bourgeoisie that wanted political power. In this context first there appears Rationalism, which criticizes rhetoric because of its lack of content, and then there is Romanticism, which strongly attacks all normative organizations that in their view hinder natural expressiveness and enclose language within standards that free human spirits cannot use to express themselves. But it is the 19th century that marks the "death of rhetoric" according to many authors, who cite its inability to solve questions that were considered key at the time.

This brief historical review allows us to better understand the implications and impact that rhetoric will have as of the first half of the 20th century. The century begins with a profound crisis due to a series of factors, which we will summarize below, following González Bedoya (1994):

-The predominance of empiricism and rationalism. These philosophies consider that the truth is the result of rational or perceived evidence (and as such, absolute evidence), and not the product of discussion among the various opinions derived from considering several (relative) truths. The impossibility of discussion about the various conceptions of truth turns rhetoric into a stylistic phenomenon.

-The anti-democratic social structure of the political regimes at the beginning of the century, which resulted in two world wars. Society does not begin to overcome the effects of these regimes until the 1950s.

-The prestige of empirical science, which considers that nothing is convincing unless it adheres to strictly scientific criteria, which rhetoric does not do.

-Mortara (1991:8) adds a fourth issue: the split between rhetoric and poetics makes rhetoric lose its dialectic function in free discussion between various postures and opinions.

The two characteristics that stand out in classical rhetoric are on the one hand its dialectic nature, which permits discussion between relatively different views of the world, and, on the other, the way in which this dialogue takes place, by appealing to quasi-logical arguments adapted to a variety of audiences. These two characteristics clearly make rhetoric a form of persuasion that is proper to democracy, understood as a context for discussion from divergent standpoints.

3. The recovery: the role of argumentation in today's mass media

Notwithstanding the view presented up to this point, the 20th century is also the century to witness the revival of rhetoric, with contributors from several disciplines. John Bender and David Wellbery (1990:23-27) place the future of rhetoric within a broad philosophical framework. Whereas in their view rhetoric reached its lowest point during the Enlightenment and the Romantic period, it is recovered in the philosophical framework of modernity. According to Bender and Wellbery, the favorable period for rhetoric is connected to the characteristics of the time. We can identify five important traits: the dominant paradigm in science is no longer neutrality and objectivity; individuality is no longer univocal; the political scene is dynamic; new means of social communication appear; and, the model of national language is no longer valid.

Even though all these aspects are extremely important for the topic at hand, we will only concentrate on two of the five. First, the dynamics of the political scene can be seen with the death of political liberalism and the beginning of democratic movements. Public life is no longer dominated by a few individuals with similar characteristics (educated, with a certain income, and a similar view of the world). In modern times the dominant characteristic is the widespread participation in the political life of people with very different, even conflicting interests, whose backgrounds are very diverse and who have very diverse world views. All of that makes social dialogue necessary to avoid conflicts that, while present, can be solved with argumentation as opposed to with physical violence.

Second, the appearance of new means of communication enable people to directly participate in social discussion. This characteristic is closely tied to the first, and cannot be understood without taking the above discussion into account. Democracy entails the participation of the masses in institutions, and that is why political discourse needs to reach all citizens with no obstacles. The preeminence of the written press wanes in comparison with other forms of the media that are easier to assimilate, which do not require previous intellectual training.

Given the view described by Bender and Wellbery, it is easy to understand the major change in society that has occurred in the 20th century, a change that favors the recovery of argumentation as a form of dialogue between views on a variety of aspects. The universal right-to-vote in the context of the society of masses forces political discourse to bear in mind the diversity in the audiences to which messages are addressed. And this is where the classical model of argumentation starting from the orator's awareness of the audience's values, ideas, and feelings becomes essential to persuade through the word.

To conclude, we might say that the audience, the public, with the new communications media available, have regained their central place in political discussion, which is the same place it occupied (with the obvious differences) in the classical period, a place which recognizes argumentation as a form of communication.

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Notes:

(1) The dates referring to authors are only approximate because different sources provide different dates. We will use those given by Xavier Laborda (1991).

(2) Stating that there were no innovative contributions to rhetoric during these centuries simplifies the issue, since there were some exceptions, principally in the teachings of liberal professors such as Abelard, who in the 12th century tried to reintroduce Aristotle's dialectics into the curriculum.

(3) González Bedoya, J. "Perelman y la retórica filosófica." Prologue to the Spanish edition of *Tratado de la argumentación. La nueva retórica*. Madrid, Gredos, 1994.

