

ESSAY

Rhetoric as epistemology of resistance

Philippe-Joseph Salazar
University of Cape Town

1. There is deep, cultural divide between rhetoric studies in Continental Europe and in the United States, and this divide offers an opportunity to reflect on rhetoric as an epistemology of power politics.

When I delivered the 12th Kenneth Burke Lecture in Rhetoric at Penn State, in 2010, I found myself standing on the great divide between North American rhetoric culture and my own¹. I had to make a confession to the audience: I had hardly read anything by Kenneth Burke, possibly the most important scholar in rhetoric as a political epistemology on the other side of the Acheron – except his essay on Hitler’s rhetoric (1939), which I had found, at the time, politically naïve and, in any event, far less prescient than Curzio Malparto’s genial *Technique du coup d’état* (1931). But naivety is a matter of context, and I may have been the naïve one.

As I told my American audience, my naivety points to a yawning gap in my own rhetorical culture: we don’t read Burke in France. And we don’t, for two reasons: if he were to be taught at all, or even merely mentioned, it would be in the philosophy classroom; but our curriculum is so rich already, and our distrust toward American philosophers is so natural (save John Dewey and Ralph Waldo Emerson), that Burke could not figure at all, and certainly not on a par with, precisely, Emerson or Dewey. And if he were to be mentioned elsewhere, it may be in public address or communication; but, there, the stumbling block is even greater: we don’t do rhetoric in France² and we consider “communication” with derision, as “not serious”. We don’t teach rhetoric, in any shape, although, in scholarly research, rhetoric studies have been, for three decades now, somewhat at the cutting edge of intellectual investigations into the history of French culture³. Public perceptions are changing, indeed, although not in education, but, oddly, in “business leadership” consultancies, a profession whose instruments get blunted as rapidly as quarterly returns are harvested (or not harvested), with the effect that communication consultants are for

Professor Philippe-Joseph Salazar is a Distinguished Professor of Rhetoric in the Centre for Rhetoric Studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. He is an internationally acclaimed researcher in rhetoric. E-mail address: Philippe.salazar@uct.ac.za

¹ I take this opportunity to thank Professor Cheryl Glenn (*Of Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence’s* fame, among many signal works) for her kind invitation and her friendship and collegiality over the years. No divide between us, I hasten to add.

² See my “Rhetoric Achieves Nature. A View from Old Europe”, in Gerard A. Hauser, *Philosophy and Rhetoric in Dialogue. Redrawing Their Intellectual Landscape*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2007, 71-88.

³ See the issue on French Rhetoric and Philosophy, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 42(4), 2009; and, in French, my edited “Thirty Years of Rhetoric Research in France”, *Dix-Septième Siècle* 236, LIX (3), 2007 – which celebrates the three “glorious” decades ushered in by Marc Fumaroli’s pioneering work.

⁴ See *Le Nouvel Economiste*, 25 March 2010, article on “Le goût de l’éloquence”, by Emmanuel Lemieux, in the “Leadership & Management” section of this influential newspaper.

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ever looking for new tools⁴. Rhetoric is somewhat the flavour of the day. For the time being.

Going back Burke and his essay on Hitler's "Battle" as he calls it, I was struck by the detached composure with which Burke handles the Hitlerian technologies of power. He analyzes the ingredients of a drama unfolding across the Atlantic, but he takes it in complete isolation from conditions created by the pan-European Fascist movement, yet he warns that the same causes may produce the same effects, on this side. He rests his case on how "good politics" (the sort, like Hitler's, that is argued as being "the better choice" for the people) resembles the sale of a commercial product, and how the value assigned rhetorically to this betterment is based on presenting "bad politics" as symptomatic of deeper causes (the scapegoat technique), so as to create the illusion that a political program addresses deeper, wider, essential issues; and, all this, in the mouth of an eloquent leader.

I guess Burke's essay was initially rejected by publishers because of the polemical, yet understated, equation between salesmanship and ideology, harnessed to the use of mass media, while there emerged, across the Atlantic, a formidable, modern, energetic powerhouse that did exert a well-recorded fascination on American industrialists and even ideologists. Technical politics tend to admire one another's, and mirror one another, down to technologies of persuasion. Hitler had been, unwittingly, the perfect student of the newly successful Carnegie training: he spoke well and made many friends and gave "leadership," or Führung. Hitler's technology of the word and the Carnegie success with the word are near contemporaries. Burke does not say it like that, of course, I do, but he describes accurately Hitler's salesmanship and his hyper-rhetorical technologies⁵.

2. We are rhetoricians. We deal in speeches. That is our epistemological compact. We deal with courage within speeches in the face of much professional animosity or disregard: from social scientists who always have at the ready an all-explaining theory or mind-numbing statistics; from historians who, since they think they deal with material facts, and are at the same time wedded to inventing narratives, have for us and for speeches an amusing disdain. For them, speeches are unimportant or, at best, they treat them as textual documents – whereas a speech is not a text. Neither of them perceive, let alone conceive, that ethics and politics can effectively be activated by speeches. And that speeches are technologies of power. That deserve their own epistemological angle of attack.

To explain better this conundrum, let me arraign French philosopher Jacques Bouveresse, not a friend of rhetoric but a keen analyst of worlds created by language: "Why is it that we think we need literary works, in addition to science and philosophy, to help solve ethical questions?" Bouveresse then recalls that Alexander Zinoviev explains, in *The Yawning Heights* (1979), how sciences have to produce their own "doubles" for the sake of entering public argument. Ideology has also to produce its own "doubles" in order to exist in public consciousness⁶. An excellent example is the "debate" around global/non-global warming, whereby the public is given "doubles" of complex scientific hypotheses, data and testing, and is asked to make up their mind on that falsified "doubling up" of scientific arguments.

⁵ I expand on all of this in my *Hyperpolitique*. Paris: Klincksieck, 2009.

⁶ Jacques Bouveresse. *La Connaissance de l'écrivain. Sur la littérature, la vérité & la vie*. Paris: Agone. 2008.

Why then do we, as rhetoricians, feel that, alongside science, philosophy, and works of fiction (indeed fiction plays a decisive role in public ethics), we need to take seriously that other category of doubles, “speeches,” in order to understand ethical problems set for the common good, that is, political problems? Or, of what are speeches the doubles? Do we fully assume the fact, or at least consider the possibility, that speeches, political speeches, are technologies that manufacture doubles, project an art of shadows, called : politics?

Here is, as it were, the genome of this doubling: a speech is the double of a political thought; a set of speeches is the double of a policy; public deliberation is the serializing of sets of doubles. The whole system is produced by rhetorical technologies.

3. However, this entire process of doubling is aimed at “the public”, which raises a further, fundamental issue: by and large, “the public” is today “a-rhetorical;” it evolves in a world of instant communication, of short-lived prudence, of emoticons passing for statements, it is also by and large illiterate in terms of discerning what is an argument, and how it works; at the same time, the professional political elite constantly reassures “the public” that politics is made of absolute standards, while you and me, after Hanna Arendt, know full well that it is merely a system by which opinions are raised to such standards and made to look like un-negotiable beliefs: they are made to congeal into what looks like arguments, with what looks like proofs, and what looks like reasonable claims, and using what look like stable meanings and proven ideas. This is a twisted form of what American philosopher Christopher Castiglia has called an “interior state” of citizenship - yet, here, devoid of virtue, being only the internalizing of deceptive technologies.

The main reason why rhetoric is no longer a *technê* lies in this tension. It cannot be a *technê* because its rules and artifacts are divorced from general, popular culture. It cannot be an *epistêmê* because its productions are singular constructions: each speech responds to a given situation, towards a given audience, to achieve a given aim – that is an Aristotelian notion we tend to easily cast aside because to accept that our discipline is based on singularities is not what we want to tell funding agencies, and a culture that spends its time dealing in a moronic oxymoron: universal beliefs.

4. This leads me to ask a further question: what is a “rhetorician”? Look at “rhetorician” in English Wikipedia, a good source to test commonplaces, and you’ll find Virginia Woolf listed alongside Jean-François Lyotard and Kenneth Burke. And there is worse company. What is it that we are for this “public” we wish to enlighten, if that is what we want to do?

I was faced with that question of self-definition when a French online magazine asked me to run a regular chronicle on rhetoric and politics. The editor told me: “You’ll be ‘le rhéteur citoyen’ – or, “the citizen rhetor” or, rather, since “citoyen” in French is now used as an adjective as much as a noun, “the citizenizing rhetor.” (The French now talk routinely, of a “citizenizing attitude” or a “citizenizing choice.”) So, his choice of words, to introduce rhetoric to the

⁷ Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States, Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States*. Duke: Duke University Press, 2008. I expand on all of this in my *Hyperpolitique*. Paris: Klincksieck, 2009.

front page of his widely read magazine, was not “rhétoricien” (rhetorician) but, oddly, “rhéteur” (rhetor), yet a rhetor who does, presumably what rhetor usually does not do, that is a rhetor-who-citizens. The implication is that those rhetors who do not “citizen” are akin to “rhetoricians”.

As I did not want to let slip the opportunity to make the case for rhetoric, I was about to agree and become a “citizenizing rhetor”, when, it struck me I should rather change one word and instead of agreeing to “citizenizing rhetor”, which hurt my sense of grammatical propriety, I should rather sign my chronicle: “Le rhéteur cosmopolite” (The cosmopolitan rhetor⁸).

This choice allowed me introduce readers to rhetoric, and to its relevance for politics, beyond the silly instrumentalization I have noted earlier at the hands of communication consultants. I told readers: you may not think “cosmopolitan rhetor” is an oxymoron, yet it is. So, I made up this tale:

When the world had been created, chaos was repelled, and cosmos came. The gods then created us to observe their creation: we were to look up at the cosmos, at the orderly stations and movements of planets; we made to think the cosmos, and to develop ideas about the organic and of the organized. And then we were entrusted with a second task, to introduce down here, where chaos reigned among humankind with something that, seen by others from a similar and far away vantage point, would look like a cosmos to them; that new cosmos, that looks like a cosmos but was in fact an illusion or an appearance of a cosmos, was given a name: politics. Polis, or being politically organized. Religions were then promptly invented to serve as cosmetic and help us, humans, think human chaos in terms of a cosmos, when everything else failed to provide this illusion – hence the stock of mystical ladders, prophetic ascensions, raptures and simply, prayers rising aloft. Ideologies do the same: grand allegorical schemes, that extol organization, mass aesthetics, the crowd as an organ of harmony. However, politics, by contrast, is made of human beliefs which, being contingent and erratic, goes on creating chaos while politicians go on validating the cosmetic idea that politics is all about arresting chaos, and caring for order, a continuous “risk management”. Politics is a set of technologies, rhetorical technologies, to provide us with the feeling cosmos exists, down here, in human affairs.

Cosmos and polis, in other words, are in a tension, and we, as rhetoricians who wish to be slightly more than social “scientists”, have to accept that politics want to deal with transcendence, and deal only with immanence. This is something politicians, especially in a democracy, cannot countenance – when they weigh the fact that human affairs are, in essence, disorderly or chaotic, they are likely then to use this realization as tool to resort to a scenario of transcendence and, as it were, seal the cosmos onto the chaos. The paradox inherent to religious politics is that their defenders disclaim what they affirm – they disclaim the validity of man-measured belief, conducive to chaos, at the very moment they enter politics, and they make use of it. This is why, in a democracy, religiously biased politicians have to focus on single, narrow, issues (abortion, clothing, homophobia, single-sex swimming pools etc), since they know they cannot

⁸ At: <http://www.lesinfluences.fr/%2B-Le-Rheteur-cosmopolite-%2B.html>.
Also: <http://www.lesinfluences.fr/-Comment-raisonnent-ils-.html>

impose a general religious programme, for lack, simply, of coercive power.

Politicians have developed ways and means to deal with chaos, and to manage the public, what I call technologies of domination⁹.

5. One such technology is to harness “taste” to reason. I take taste in the Kantian sense of “judgement of taste”. The effect of welding taste to reason is to produce a first technology, that of “political ideas”.

Like many of you here I have, at some stage in my education, studied political science or political philosophy or the history of political ideas. The overlap in points out to the deceptive, technological nature of “political ideas.” The problem with academic courses in any of them is, rhetorically, a simple one: they manufacture the appearance of a science of government, specific as a science ought to be, to an object (governing, or power), whereas they align and organize notions borrowed at random from philosophy in the best part, in an operation of selective reading and selective structuring which, when they are taught to future politicians, advisers or lobbyists (in short, those who will govern, one day) have the look of a “thought” or even a “doctrine”¹⁰. Not quite philosophy, not quite opinion survey; something in between.

The fact such courses used to be taught, and not a long time ago, at law schools - and that is where they originated in mid-19th century America, at Columbia¹¹ - should not come as a surprise: these courses function similarly to legal arguments whereby the aim of skilful arrangement of claims and artefacts is to produce an effect of truth, a semblance of incontrovertible rationality – looking like judgements of reason.

My take is a Kantian one: courses in politics are a technology by which judgements of taste, entirely dependent upon circumstances (who teaches the course, what reading material is used, how much latitude is given students, what is the mission statement, overt or covert, of the university, etc), are fashioned into judgements of reason. The mechanism is, however, a timed one: this fashioning is effective not because the professor is persuasive or clever or the instructor savvy in her readings, but because a time-lag exists between the moment a student goes through the mill, and the moment, ten, twenty years later, when “ideas” acquired in class re-emerge with the power of certainty. Then, all circumstances of their origin have been stripped away, and all that remains for the student become politician or lobbyist or adviser, is a brilliant conceptual core, which appears self-evident, entirely satisfying and rational, when it is merely a judgement of taste that, with the passing of time, “is” a judgement of reason. In the worst case scenario, these false judgements of reason seem in no need even of demonstration. They are called “convictions”.

I would suggest that a political idea is a mechanism whereby three gears come into play:

⁹ For a full development, refer to my *Hyperpolitique*.

¹⁰ See my *Hyperpolitique* for a precise analysis of two major courses at prestigious Science Po, in Paris. I am certain the procedure I describe is universally valid.

¹¹ The Hegelian Francis Lieber.

- *forming ideas, embedded in group ethics, and transmitted mainly by education.
- *judgements of taste.
- *the practical evaluation on the underlying efficacy of the forming ideas and how to correlate them with the belief in the natural, rational, normal, “cosmic,” efficacy of the judgements of taste passing for judgements of reason.

Any political consultant, by instinct or by design, knows that to set up a platform, that is exactly what you do:

- *you suggest a practical idea.
- *you weld it to an ethical purpose.
- *you subsume both under a validating, rational, idea.

6. The question then arises of how a politician can translate this (false) judgement of reason into public policy. To achieve this, a second technology comes into play, that of identification. What is the definition of identity and why does it matter in rhetorical technologies of power?

First, a definition of identity. There are three ways to look at it.

*identity is sameness: if x is identical to y , x and y cannot be told one from the other. Sameness means non-distinction.

*identity is what we may call ipseity, from “ipse” in Latin, I myself: an ID card is a process of such identity: the face is the same as the photo. This sort of identity implies identifiability, which has to be performed and asserted.

*identity is attributive: a rapport is established between attributes and the person: this is community identity. It requires wider performance, it leads to debate, it is “ethical” inasmuch as it has to do with group (*ethnos*) characters.

What is rhetorical power, in a politician or lobbyist or adviser, if not the ability, through words, to orchestrate the three identities, and have it serve one’s attempt at domination? Identity matters because the mainstay of any policy formulation, and I go back to my initial statement regarding Burke and salesmanship, is that strange movement by which one (I, the politician) embodies others (“the people”). I am sure each country has its own culture of one-ness-for-all, however, it is not impossible to describe a general technology of identification, one I have termed “totemic”.

In this technology, the “alpha orator”, like the alpha male, superimposes onto himself (or herself) the three moves of identity: she is we and we are she, in a desire of fusion – the best example is “yes, we can”. Then we recognize in him what we are, and we catch ourselves thinking: that is exactly what I think, but I could not put it better. We identify. And it can happen that the politician mimics our habitus, our way of living, our moeurs and moods, that she simulates our ways and behaviours and private modes. Engineered sameness creates fusion. Engineered ipseity leads to acquiescence. Resemblance forges recognition.

The outcome is a technological transformation of the “alpha orator” who goes from being an element of a series (us) to becoming or appearing to be the

essence of the series. The alpha orator is no longer that element of the lot, who, temporarily in a democracy, holds an alpha position: the alpha orator becomes and is presented as the essence of the us. All ceremonies, flags, etiquette are made to have the element of the series appear as the essence of the series, through the activation of rhetorical arguments that set in motion the three mechanisms of identity. It is a totemic procedure based on a logical and ethical fallacy.

7. Most political speeches are at their most effective when they harness to this complex operation an ethical technology I call “allegorese” or the use of allegory as a deliberative technology.

Briefly, because time is running out, let me say that democratic politics demands the simulation of chaos and its resolution or reconciliation in an allegory which, in turn encompasses identity processes and totemic projections. The allegorical technology or allegorese entails a triple move for what I have called “eloquent leadership”:

*First, to evoke, through the fact, event or object at hand, another fact which carries with itself strong identity processes with regard to the intended audience. The effect of these summons, as I call them, is to say more than is being said: a homology of qualities is created between the object at hand and the object evoked or summoned. To evoke the anterior object casts the orator in a privileged position, that of being the only one who can evoke this relation of qualities (an excellent case is Mr Obama’s constant “reading” of glorious past presidents to back up his own ethos). Depth is created and the totem moves to the foreground.

*Second, to interpret, to translate, to explain, to become the passage. Once the homology is evoked, time created, a translation becomes necessary so that all aspects of arbitrariness are eliminated and the possibility of an adversarial evocation be cancelled out. The summons, the calling out, must appear as rational, integrated into a code accessible to all. The totem provides a classification. It provides the group with a new sense: that historical chaos, political uncertainty, social unrest are only the surface, that, underneath, there exists an orderly frame of reference, now exhibited by the orator.

*Third, the summons and the interpretation, the homology and the code, are temporal events. They, actually, create time: the present coheres with the past, the present throws open the future, and, more forcefully, the present seems like a natural course, running seamlessly from fact evoked to fact at hand and fact proposed, all of it at the behest of the politician who has mastered judgement and identity. This is what I have called in my *Hyperpolitique* a “chronogenesis”, how rhetoric, political rhetoric creates political sense by handling time. The so-called “lesson of history” is not the one given by the past to the present, but by the present, using the past to create the future. That is the allegorese lesson.

8. Where do these technologies of power leave us, as rhetoricians? A rhetorician’s virtue, I would contend, is called “epistemological resistance”. And that sort of resistance is made of an utter devotion to the stuff of politics, speeches, and of an utter disdain toward any attempts to tell us that they are made of ideas, that they are made of truths, that they are ethical, when

they are merely technological transformations hinging on power politics. Our epistemological virtue is to tell “the public” that there is no such thing in democratic politics as truth, justice, peace. It is, of course, a taller order to live without those cosmetic illusions. But that is the burden placed on being a free citizen: to negotiate through transient opinions, again and again. And the burden we should place on ourselves is to remind governed and government alike that rhetoric is about looking into the chaos of human affairs. And resist any attempt at “cosmetizing” it.