

FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DEMOCRATIC RHETORIC

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Men are so simple, and so subject to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived. Machiavelli (1948: xviii).

In the history and philosophy of rhetoric, which overlaps with political theory or simply “philosophy”, the question of truth applied to the sphere of public deliberation, the “polis”, the social contract – whatever term is used –, is not new. Politics, rhetoric and truth have been linked ever since democracy took shape. Hannah Arendt, reflecting upon the luminous Greek legacy under the long shadow cast by Nazi devastation, forcefully made the point that the Ancient Greek belief in argued speech – “logos”, what I would call “deliberate deliberation” – is fundamental to any definition of humankind as political. To share in social life necessitates, at any level and in various grades of expertise, to be able to articulate thoughts into words, and to impart these words a “logical” strain, so as to make an impression upon those we address; sometimes we manage to “persuade” them, sometimes we fail at doing so but, even then, we leave a trace of our speech (“logos”) in them. Rhetoric lies, in Arendt’s vision, at the core of being citizens (Arendt 1993). The “logic” invoked is however not that of logicians: citizens are not philosophers, they do not search for universally proven Truth. In fact – and this is a fundamental “political fact” –, they *should* not. They utter their beliefs, expecting their fellow citizens to do the same, and to listen to each other’s expression of opinions which each speakers may hold to be true. But, and this is the other side of Arendt’s argument on democracy, truths expressed by citizens must somehow represent the diversity of the citizenry. This argument is profoundly Aristotelian: a democracy is made of diverse individuals. That insight applies *a fortiori* to “multicultural” societies like South Africa. In a democracy, in Ancient Greece no less than in South Africa today, truth is transient, fragmented, often community-based, it belongs indeed to the domain of prejudice, opinion, belief, perception (Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, 13). This is why argument and deliberation – “rhetoric” – allow citizens, and their

representatives, to articulate such diversity. The anti-democratic peril of ideology consists, conversely, in the attempt to try and impose one single truth onto the citizenry – as in the *apartheid* regime, that latter-day offspring of fascism.

However, democratic citizens bear an incredible burden, if they are to accept that to be part of the Sovereign entails just that: a Sovereign's duty. The difficulty of being a democratic citizen resides indeed in learning to accept that each of us, however passionate we are about “what we believe”, and hold to be “true”, may and will be untrue for another citizen who, like us, shares in the Sovereign.

Politics in a democracy is a contest of words about competing truths. No government ought ever to believe that they have “the truth”. They are merely the sum total of what Aristotle describes as some sort of picnic: at the democratic table we all bring our own food to make the party successful, in spite of the variety of condiments and the diversity of foodstuffs. As the philosopher of rhetoric Barbara Cassin, furthering this argument, points out, “harmony” in a democracy is the sum total of disagreements – to agree on ends (to live in a democracy) while disagreeing on means, and constantly, thanks to debate and deliberation and argument – from talk shows to parliaments –, to enrich such diversity (Cassin 1995: II, 3). Aristotle called this multifarious process of competing truths, “friendship”, *politikē philia*, “political love” (Aristotle, *Nic. Ethics*, IX, 6). Incidentally, there is a parallel here with the French Revolution's use of the word *citoyen* (“citizen”). As a form of address this word replaced the old regime's address nomenclature that fixed each “subject's” position in social intercourse (inferior/superior); *citoyen* was a way to affirm such “political love” in a democracy – then aptly termed “republic”, i.e. “that which belongs to all”. A similar intent lay behind the use of “comrade” by the Socialist International – a “comrade” being someone with whom (to follow the original Latin meaning of that word) you share a room and a bed, in brief someone with whom you share your life – your political life. By implication, the accusation often levelled at politicians, to the effect that they resort to “rhetoric”, evinces a strange situation: those who proffer it,

1. fail to recognize their own failure to be as persuasive as those they attack and,
2. – and this is far more dangerous for democracy – , fail to realize that “rhetoric” is part and parcel of public debate – unless they believe that there is fixed “truth” about living together in a democracy.

Significantly, religious zealots, who are the living remnants of pre-democratic societies, often find themselves caught in a “deliberative conflict”, an argumentative tension between their faith-based belief (held as “the Truth”) and their citizen-based opinions. They stand astride two domains of truth, one which is unarguable, the other which is essentially argument-based. For that reason they aptly illustrate a familiar kind of attack on the seemingly erratic nature of political contest in a democracy: more forcefully than others, they try and force onto the public sphere of deliberation, opinions that are not presented as negotiable, and that turn out to be resilient to deliberation.

Politicians are indeed often branded as charlatans or people without ethics. This argument is not new either. It found its expression in the Ancient Greek debate between the Sophists and Plato. Arendt summarizes the debate: one can accuse the Sophists (those who can, *ad libitum*, argue for this or against that, and those who teach others how to perform such feats, not unlike today’s so-called “spin doctors” who spin words into beliefs and weave, or, so say their less skilled detractors, a web of deceit) of not respecting “truth”. But one does so at the peril of retrenching from public deliberation and civil life the very nature of democracy, notably our common ability to change our opinions and to argue for them either way. A basic tenet of democracy is that “virtue” (the ability to exercise common sense) is equally divided between all of us. This is the reason why we do elect representatives that are not “experts” but, just like us, able to think for themselves. In that light we do not and should not expect government to have better judgment than ordinary citizens. They are just that: ordinary people, who talk, exchange ideas, change their minds – they belong to “rhetoric”. A good citizen must then be a Sophist, who can “truly” believe in policy X before election time, then vote for Y even if Y has a track record that does not support policy X. It happens all the time. But why? Because a democracy is not a theocracy. The ability to exchange viewpoints with others, and with oneself, is the very stuff of democracy. A citizen need not believe in truth, but merely in the value of “this” truth, correlated with the belief in deliberation, rhetoric, argument – which relativizes all truths and, as Arendt puts it, make you see the world (the political world) through someone else’s words. Democracy is the art of conversation.

The debate on truth in politics, and on the value of “rhetoric” (public deliberation) is therefore nothing new. But no solace is to be found in the fact that the issue of truth in politics is still a matter of serious contention, further obfuscated by the decay of rationalism in philosophy and the humane sciences at large, where postmodern scepticism or relativism looms large. It

indicates that the theoretical stage set at the birth of democracy, in Athens two and a half millennia ago, has hardly moved its props. The same actors, the same plot, the same décor are still with us. However, Ancient theory and practice of democracy, or the Enlightenment's elaboration on what we nowadays call "democracy" – as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* – dealt frontally with the question of "truth" in politics; by contrast, we in our time have learned not to face up to this question. We are even afraid of it. Unless, as in the South African case, the resilience of ideology and the harnessing of oppressive power to the eradication of the rule of law and of natural law – the touchstone of modern democracy – forced citizens and intellectuals as citizens to engage with "truth".

The purpose of this volume is to try and acclimatize "rhetoric" to the philosophical scene in South Africa, and more in general in Africa as a whole, and to contribute a scholarly reflection on the emergence of public deliberation in the South African democracy by providing analyses from the standpoint of rhetoric.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) offered a particularly good start. It was a massive exercise in deliberation, a telling of "truth", an exposé on a people's diverse visions on events and history. Elsewhere, I have proposed a rhetorical reading of the TRC as a phenomenon of public deliberation. My view of the matter may be summarized as follows. On the one hand, there was the Platonic drift of the Commissioners – they wanted to unveil "the truth" of *apartheid*; their stance was itself rooted in religious or ideological beliefs impervious to the Arendt model. On the other hand, the People, in their submissions, held high the civic duty of "telling stories", of exemplifying multivocality, thus turning out to be excellent Sophists (Salazar 2002). The people offered testimonies, they opened up a stunning treasury of words, narrations, opinions onto "who did what for what reason". They acted as true Aristotelians.

This takes us to the subject matter of the present collection. Four papers (Part One) tackle, from four different angles, the re-telling of private truths about a public regimen of affairs in front of a public commission. In Part Two, public deliberation and the fashioning of truth are approached from a variety of perspectives, examples and situations of "rhetorical democracy" outside South Africa. This leads on to public deliberation as the latter plays itself out in political issues, such as the African Renaissance. Part Three attempts to offer examples of how rhetoric may be brought to bear upon politics in order to understand how dialogue between different levels of agency creates democratic negotiation and, in the process, shapes policy.

The volume closes on a philosophical analysis of the “ethical” dimension inherent to public deliberation as well as to the contest of beliefs; and on an examination of the volume’s contents in the light of long-standing concerns of African philosophy, and of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie*.

The editors and the contributing authors harbour the hope that this volume can further impress on informed readers two leading thoughts that have informed the intellectual exchanges leading to the present volume:

1. rhetoric has a place in the construction of South Africa’s incipient democracy, and
2. in a radical manner – to recall Hannah Arendt’s expression – , to consider politics in the perspective of Truth it is to step out of politics.

References

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