



CLASSIQUES
GARNIER

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RÉSUMÉ – Dans notre monde où tout est contingent et indéterminé, pluriel et précaire, avons-nous vraiment besoin de rhétorique ? C'est à cette question que veut répondre le présent texte. Lequel s'attache dès lors à dégager les éléments d'une possible épistémologie sophistique. L'approche est historique autant que théorique, et s'appuie sur une relecture de l'*Éloge d'Hélène* de Gorgias. La rhétorique est présentée comme une boîte à outils à l'aide desquels l'individu progresse en liberté dans le monde social et politique.

THE TRAGEDY OF REASON

Living in a pluralistic society

We live, as everyone knows, in an age of pluralism¹ and diversity. Moreover, we realize that we live in a world of contingency and indeterminacy and this can have a profound effect on how we think about our life in society. The belief that there are no given essences, natural hierarchies or unchanging destinies, rather than reducing the stakes of human action, can infinitely raise them. Faced with this situation, living in a society which is “in desperate need of self-responsible, assertive, and independent-thinking citizens²”, I would like to ask a provocative question: do we really need rhetoric? Quite obviously we do, but why we need it and what kind of rhetoric we need is a more complex issue. I will try to answer these questions from two different points of view, one historical and the other theoretical. First of all, I will try to show that rhetoric arose and developed from the interaction of three different factors that characterized Greek intellectual life in the fifth century BC: the emergence of pluralism, a tragic view of the world, a reinterpretation of the agonistic *ethos* typical of Greek culture. Viewed from this perspective, I would argue that rhetoric constitutes a specific framework within which the individual can exercise an active citizenship, trying to deal with a social and political world in which the pluralism of values is constitutive of personal identity, contingency is everywhere, “conflict, suffering and strife are endemic and not a temporary condition of a path towards reconciliation or redemption³”. In other words, faced with the precariousness and contingency that characterize our life, we

1 See: Peter Lassman, *Pluralism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011.

2 Manfred Kraus, “The Making of Truth in Debate: The Case of (and a Case for) the Early Sophists”, in Ch. Kock & L. V. Villadsen (ed.), *Rhetorical Citizenship and Public Deliberation*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012, p. 41.

3 Mark Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 35.

need rhetoric because rhetoric in its essential nature mixes uncertainty and fallibility with rationality.

Before beginning my historical reconstruction, I need to make a preliminary comment. The issue of the origins of rhetoric was widely debated in the nineties, with answers ranging from the Homeric roots of classical rhetoric to the hypothesis that the discipline was invented by Plato⁴. However, I do not think it is possible to find a “smoking gun” and identify one single element that brought about the birth of rhetoric. For this reason, I believe that it would be more fruitful to try to reconstruct, albeit synthetically and indirectly, the conceptual framework that paved the way for the origins and development of rhetoric. After this reconstruction, I will briefly look at one text—Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*—which is, in my opinion, a paradigmatic example of this framework.

RHETORIC AND THE TRAGEDY OF PLURALISM IN THE FIFTH CENTURY B.C.

I shall start with pluralism. As is well-known, the term has a modern connotation. We need to recognize Isaiah Berlin’s role in bringing to light the many aspects of this notion in an attempt “to draw attention to pluralism as it featured in history: the rare and fleeting challenger to the giant of monism, the David to monism’s Goliath. By focusing on the relationship between monism and pluralism, and, more particularly, on the disproportionate prevalence of monism, in comparison with pluralism, Berlin was able not only to illustrate the uniqueness of the pluralist perspective but to underline the normative importance in identifying it⁵”. However, applying the concept of pluralism to ancient Greece is not an anachronism. Although we are accustomed to thinking of the Greek world from the monistic perspective of Plato and Aristotle, and their philosophical forbearer Parmenides, the relationship between

4 Edward Schiappa, *The Beginnings of Rhetorical Theory in Classical Greece*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999.

5 Lauren J. Apfel, *The Advent of Pluralism*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 1.

the one and the many was a widely debated issue in the Greek world. To quote Michael Lloyd, it “is the Ariadne’s thread running through all Greek physical speculation⁶”. We need merely consider Democritus’ atomism or Empedocles’ and Anaxagoras’ qualitative pluralism to see that already in pre-Socratic philosophy “this dilemma—how to square the singularity of reality with the diversity of phenomena—engendered a range of pluralist philosophical solutions⁷”. During the fifth century, a shift in focus occurred from heavenly to earthly things and a new intellectual climate emerged against which the monism/pluralism dichotomy could play itself out. Thus, the relationship between monism and pluralism, which marked the debate about cosmology and natural science in the sixth and early fifth century, began to pervade the sphere of human affairs and to manifest itself in the fields of moral philosophy, history and tragedy. It is in this context that moral pluralism makes its appearance. In the fifth century the idea emerged that moral beliefs and practices are bound up with customs and conventions, and these vary greatly between societies. The intricate relationship between *nomos* and *physis* became a contentious issue. The historian Herodotus tells the story of how the Persian king Darius asked some Greeks at his court if there was any price for which they would be willing to eat their dead father’s bodies in the way the Callatiae did. The Greeks said nothing could induce them to do this. Darius then asked some Callatiae who were present if they would ever consider burning their fathers’ bodies, as was the custom among the Greeks. The Callatiae were horrified at the suggestion. Herodotus sees this story as vindicating the poet Pindar’s dictum that “custom (*nomos*) is lord of all”; people’s beliefs and practices are shaped by custom, and they typically assume that their own ways are the best. Herodotus’ anecdote is not an isolated moment of reflection on cultural diversity and the conventional basis for morality.

The fifth century saw increasing contact between Greeks and other peoples as a result of war, travel, trade and the foundation of the colonies. As itinerant intellectual and teachers Greek sophists were well acquainted with the legal systems, political structures, languages, customs of other cultures and civilizations. “Not only did their profession make them likely travelers, participants in inter-state activities and foreign

6 Michael Lloyd, *Sopochles: “Electra”*, London, Duckworth, 2005, p. 150.

7 Lauren J. Apfel, *The Advent of Pluralism, op. cit.*, p. 28-29.

diplomats. But it made them travelers likely to engage in meaningful exchanges of ideas with the people they met—potential pupils or other intellectuals⁸. So impressed were they by the diversity in religions, political systems, laws, manners, and tastes they encountered in different societies that the sophists were prompted to reflect upon them, gaining a profound awareness of the pluralism of moral values. But just because the sophists arrived at an understanding of moral values without reference to the later Platonic concepts of universal, objective and independently existing ideals, it does not follow that moral opinions somehow cease to exist or to be a matter of concern—they are simply recognized as being subjective and perspective. For example, in Plato's *Protagoras* we find the sophist affirming that: "So complex and various is the good, that in some cases while oil is good for the external parts of the human body, it is extremely harmful for the internal parts" (334b 7-8).

Although applied here to a banal topic with the typically platonic vein of irony, the relativity expressed is nevertheless authentic and serious. Neither the helpfulness of oil for the exterior of the body nor its harmfulness for the body's interior are presented as errors of perception or judgement—oil is both good and bad, and its value for a person or situation is conditioned by perspective and circumstance. Such relativity is not confined exclusively to the statements of Protagoras. In Plato's eponymous dialogue, Meno gives Socrates the account of virtue that he learned from Gorgias. Meno tells Socrates that there are different virtues for different people, according to their gender, age, and status. Entirely different actions and aims constitute "good" for a free adult male and for a slave child. Neither the morality of the free male nor the slave child is held up as being true or necessarily more just; Meno, citing Gorgias, recognizes a multitude of potential rights and wrongs, which derive their meaning not from any relation to a universal ideal, but from the needs, abilities, and perceptions of the perspectives open to different individuals.

Although moral pluralism enjoyed a large following in the fifth century, it is not understandable severed from a specifically sophistic claim—one of paramount importance for the growth of rhetoric—the recognition of which we could define epistemological pluralism. Interestingly, this form of pluralism is rooted in the cosmological speculation that

8 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

characterized the sixth century. Indeed, not only did the sophists not completely abandon the investigation of nature, but, above all, they drew a very different and instructive lesson from it compared to the Socratic one. Thus, according to Xenophon, at the beginning of *Memorabilia*:

He [Socrates] did not even discuss that topic so favoured by other talkers, “the Nature of the Universe”: and avoided speculation on the so-called “Cosmos” of the Professors, how it works, and on the laws that govern the phenomena of the heavens: indeed he would argue that to trouble one’s mind with such problems is sheer folly. In the first place, he would inquire, did these thinkers suppose that their knowledge of human affairs was so complete that they must seek these new fields for the exercise of their brains; or that it was their duty to neglect human affairs and consider only things divine? Moreover, he marvelled at their blindness in not seeing that man cannot solve these riddles; since even the most conceited talkers on these problems did not agree in their theories, but behaved to one another like madmen [...]. (Xen, *Memorabilia*, 1, 11-14, transl. Marchant)

The same situation, the conflict between different interpretations of the nature of reality, is interpreted in the following way in Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*:

Persuasion belonging to discourse shapes the soul at will: witness, first, the discourses of the astronomers, who by setting aside one opinion and building up another in its stead make incredible and obscure things apparent to the eyes of opinion. (Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, 13, transl. Donovan)

The difference could not be clearer: while for Socrates the conflict between different theories shows the substantial futility of this type of investigation and the folly of those who undertake it, the same phenomenon becomes for Gorgias the basis for an epistemological reflection which has three key elements: 1) any form of knowledge does not rise above the *doxa*, *i.e.* probable knowledge, which can always be rebutted by a revised and more likely one; 2) in this comparison between the different views expressed, a fundamental role is played by their likeness and persuasiveness, and 3) the conflict between different views is conceived as an *agon* whose final judgement is up to those who need to be convinced of the validity of a given theory.

I will return to Gorgias’ text later. For now I would like to emphasize the close relationship between this epistemological reflection and

Protagoras' statement, mentioned by Diogenes Laertius, that there are two sides to every question, opposed to each other. This enigmatic proposition suggests that there are at least two arguments (*logoi*) to be put forward on any issue that any thesis, any idea, is inherently contestable. The doctrine of *dissoi logoi*, or "opposing arguments", is a discursive mode that seeks to explore the "probable truth" in alternate perspectives, underlining that rational communication is infinitely complicated and deferred by differences of cultural experience, personal and political agendas, and, of course, the stubborn dispositions of sensibilities. The practice of *dissoi logoi* is the mark of an immanent context which respects difference, a theoretical sanctioning of cultural pluralism and an agonistic structure in which action arises from the tension between contrary forces, or what Eric Charles White calls "the strife of opposites"⁹. This agonistic strife is intended to be generative rather than paralysing, an interpretation that can be best understood by reference to the rhetorical concept of *kairos*¹⁰. Although the term has no modern equivalent, its meaning was close to "the right moment" or "the opportune". Because of this it was associated with a pragmatic response to the needs of a contingent situation which requires a decision. Thus, from the perspective of *kairos*, rhetorical action becomes the means by which identities become temporarily enacted and forged in response to the needs of a specific contingent situation. "At the meeting point of two sets of "appearances", two arguments, two theses, the sophists' method operated as an intellectual technique which offered the best means of coming to a lucid understanding of the bewildering universe that surrounds us"¹¹.

However, there is another aspect that I would like to emphasize: while, on the one hand, the recognition of the plurality of values implies the inevitability of conflict between different values, on the other hand this conflict has a tragic nature. Pluralist conflict is often tragic. As Berlin puts it "the world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate,

9 Eric Charles White, *Kaironomia: On the Will to Invent*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987.

10 Phillip Sipiora & James S. Baumlin (ed.), *Kairos and Rhetoric. Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2002.

11 Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, trans. J. Lloyd, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 89.

and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others¹². In the Attic tragedies we encounter many situations where two positions are contrasted with each other very directly and it is unclear how these positions are resolved. An interesting example from classical literature is Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The first choral ode of the play explains how a Greek naval expedition has been ordered by Zeus himself (55-62) against the city of Troy to avenge the kidnapping of Helen by Paris. Agamemnon leads the expedition, and takes his daughter Iphigenia along with him. However, the goddess Artemis is angry for unspecified reasons and has becalmed the expedition at Aulis, out at sea. Not only will this prevent the fulfilment of Zeus's command, but there will eventually be problems with food and water (188-189) for the large marine army. The prophet Calchas, on Agamemnon's ship, divines that the only remedy for the situation is the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter to placate the goddess. The alternative is a slow death by starvation for everyone in the expedition. After deliberation, Agamemnon indeed has her sacrificed. Here is the crucial passage:

Then the elder king [Agamemnon] spake and said: "Hard is my fate to refuse obedience, and hard, if I must slay my child, the glory of my home, and at the altar-side stain with streams of a virgin's blood a father's hand. Which of these courses is not fraught with ill? How can I become a deserter to my fleet and fail my allies in arms? For that they should with passionate eagerness crave a sacrifice to lull the winds—even a virgin's blood—stands within their right. May it be for the best". But when he had donned the yoke of Necessity, with veering of spirit, impious, unholy, unsanctified, from that hour his purpose shifted to resolve that deed of uttermost audacity. For mankind is emboldened by wretched delusion, counsellor of ill, primal source of woe. So then he hardened his heart to sacrifice his daughter that he might prosper a war waged to avenge a woman, and as an offering for the voyaging of a fleet! (vv. 205-226)

Nevertheless, Agamemnon should not be seen as a mere puppet. He is allowed to deliberate and to choose; he knows what he is doing, he is aware of all relevant aspects of the situation (except perhaps of the reason or Artemis's anger), and he is not being physically coerced or personally threatened. Rather he is compelled to act in this way

12 Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002 [1969], p. 213-214.

insofar as his alternatives include no very desirable options. As such there does not appear to be any incompatibility between choice and necessity here. Interestingly, at the beginning of the first antistrophe of the first stasimon we find the following verses (385-386): “Baneful Persuasion, irresistible child of ruin who plans beforehand, forces him”. As Richard Buxton remarks, the genealogy given here is an invention of Aeschylus to link the evil persuasion at work early in the trilogy with other demonic forces which can bring about man’s ruin. But to whom does the statement about persuasion refer? Persuasion is often associated with the elopement of Helen, as in Gorgias’ *Encomium*, and if this fact is coupled with the likely reference of the first strophe to Paris, we must conclude that the words uttered by the chorus refer to the abduction of Helen. “But like so much else in this stasimon, these two verses are double-edged. The operation of Persuasion is reminiscent of the *parakopā* which affects Agamemnon at 223 and both are defined as “baneful”. The chorus words are quite as relevant to Agamemnon as to Paris¹³.” In taking the decision to kill Iphigeneia, Agamemnon was under the influence of ruinous Persuasion, even though the words by which he was persuaded were his own.

While in the case of Agamemnon the choice between two different and incompatible courses of action regards the same person, there are many situations in the extant tragedies—particularly in Euripides but in many of the others as well—where two directly contrasting positions are held by two different characters. The so-called *agon*-scenes, associated especially with Protagoras’ already quoted claim that sound policy should be based on a consideration of the two opposed *logoi*, are a distinctive feature of Greek tragedy and its reflections on the relationship between language and violence. Although in the fifth century other genres show an increased tendency to present conflict and disagreements through the medium of opposed speeches, the tragic side of this opposition is, unsurprisingly, more clearly expressed in the tragedies. In particular, in several Euripidean tragedies there are two particularly interesting elements:

1. a metalinguistic reflection on the nature and origins of verbal competitions, as in the following words pronounced by Eteocles in

13 Richard Buxton, *Persuasion in Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 105-106.

the *Phoenician Women*: “If to all men the same thing were by nature noble and wise at the same time, men would have no contentious verbal quarrels; but as it is, nothing is either similar or the same for mortals, other than naming, but in reality this is not the case” (vv. 499-502);

2. the debates are often inconclusive and the characters in the play derive little practical benefit from the verbal competitions in which they are engaged. This seems to be another means of exploring the uncertain boundaries between language and action and of inviting the members of the audience to reflect on the utility and the dangers of verbal competitions in general.

In contrast to the opinions of Nietzsche¹⁴ and a whole series of scholars¹⁵, what we see in the tragedy is a rational argumentation moving between two positions. However, reason does not prevail. Reason can produce incredibly powerful arguments but eventually it comes up against the reality of violence, which it cannot overcome. While most of philosophers think that reason can ultimately find an underlying pattern in history and reality and can transform things through the force of the better argumentation, tragedy does not espouse such a stance.

GORGIAS' ENCOMIUM OF HELEN Language, action and violence

The complex relationship between language, action and violence lies at the heart of Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*. This is not the place for a detailed analysis of *Encomium*, so I will confine myself to highlighting the most theoretically relevant aspects of the text: the metalinguistic function and the consequences that Gorgias draws from it. Firstly, we must begin to ask ourselves what type of text *Encomium* is. It would

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, Leipzig, E. W. Fritsch, 1872.

15 E.g., J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990; Arlene Saxonhouse, “The Tyranny of Reason in the World of Polis”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 80, 1986, p. 403-418.

be wrong to attempt to apply the tripartition of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to the work. On the one hand, in the pre-Aristotelian tradition the word *epideixis* refers to the lengthy uninterrupted speeches of the sophists as opposed to Socratic dialogue while, on the other hand, the *epideixis* can be more generally considered the speeches that wise men or experts in various disciplines make to display their skills. When a rhetorician proclaims his own competence, a highly unusual situation arises. Through language—the production of a *logos*—he must demonstrate his ability to use the *logos* itself and this inevitably leads to a metalinguistic sphere. While apparently speaking about other matters, the text is actually self-referential. Gorgias' text takes this situation to its extreme consequences. The whole text contains elements with an explicit metalinguistic function whose purpose is to provide instructions for the audience and aid understanding of the message. I shall focus on three of these elements, all of which are found in strategic places within the text.

I shall begin with the conclusion. Indeed, the text ends rather surprisingly with the following statement: "I wished to write the speech as an encomium of Helen and as amusement for myself" (*Hel.* 21). However, Gorgias' intention is not, as many interpreters have thought, to lower his text to the level of a divertissement and deprive it of any theoretical value. The term *paignion* is not the only one used to classify the text. Rather, the text is simultaneously interpreted from two perspectives: from the viewpoint of Helen and that of Gorgias. It is precisely by placing the term *Encomium* (*egkomion*), which clearly belongs to a serious register, next to the term *paignion*, considered as a sort of joke that the real nature of the text emerges. It is an *Encomium* with a paradoxical nature which has two fundamental consequences. Firstly, the paradoxical *Encomium* can only be understood by its deviance from serious praise. It implicitly affirms the plurality and relativity of all its values through this relationship. To suggest that every subject can be exalted indifferently thanks to skilful linguistic manipulation means that there is no absolute, standard or single truth on which one's own judgements can be made. Secondly, the role that the power of language plays in creating and destroying such values and orthodox beliefs implicitly becomes a means of displaying the technical ability of the speaker. I wish to add a third element to these two to which I shall return later. When the text ends with its final word, *paignion*, it seems to create a challenge of

interpretation for the reader or listener. What game has just finished and what are its rules?

I shall now move on to the beginning of the text. The statement with which the *Encomium* begins is no less significant. The Sicilian sophist states that: “The grace of a city is excellence of its men, of a body beauty, of a mind wisdom, of an action virtue, of a speech truth; the opposites of these are a disgrace” (*Hel.* 1). It is extremely clear that the start of *Encomium* establishes a close relationship between speech and truth. This relationship is immediately repeated with an explicit reference to the *Encomium* itself in the following paragraph where Gorgias states that, by imposing an argumentative structure on his speech, he wishes to end the accusations regarding Helen’s bad reputation and show that his accusers are lying. His speech therefore seems, on the one hand, to have an explicit claim to the truth and, on the other hand, to oppose the preceding, unanimous poetic tradition which is accused of spreading falsehood regarding Helen.

I shall now consider the third and final metalinguistic marker. The central part of *Encomium*, from paragraphs eight to fourteen, is broadly metalinguistic. To demonstrate Helen’s innocence even though she was persuaded, Gorgias uses this part of the text to describe the function of *logos* and to show that it can have a coercive force on its listeners. The conceptual picture that derives from this completely overturns the perspective from which the *Encomium* opened. In § 13 Gorgias analyses the effect of persuasive speech in relation to three types of discourse: Firstly, that of natural scientists; secondly, of orators and finally, of philosophers. In all three cases, speech does not seem to be marked by its truth but, rather, by its capacity to persuade and deceive the people to whom it refers. The demonstration of the efficacy of *logos* revolves precisely around these three terms of persuasion, deceit and opinion, as well as the possibility of acquitting Helen of the guilt attributed to her. It is only possible to arrive at the conclusion that Helen was completely innocent by considering *logos* on a par with coercive force. Although the text is uncertain in various parts, § 12 explicitly reveals the paradox in Gorgias’ opinion. Persuasion was traditionally considered to be opposed to violence and numerous texts clearly show how the opposition between persuasion and violence within Greek thought is the element which determines the distinction between men and animals, on the one hand,

and Greeks and barbarians on the other. However, Gorgias maintains that persuasion and speech, due to the irresistible power that they can exert, are not in opposition to violence but analogous: (“and indeed persuasion though not having an appearance of compulsion has the same power”). Although such a statement seems to constitute a necessary step in the argument to demonstrate Helen’s innocence even where it seems least plausible, it would be wrong to consider it on a par with mere rhetorical strategy. It is organically connected to a competitive model of the functioning of speech and this pattern of disagreement and opposition appears to contain the elements of a struggle for predominance where *logos* is opposed to another *logos* and aims to supersede it.

The three examples in paragraph thirteen underline this aspect very clearly. The first, as we have already seen, concerns scientific speech and shows how a *doxa* in this field must initially confute and eliminate a rival, competitive *doxa* in order to be upheld as scientific theory. The second example, however, concerns political or judiciary eloquence and, more specifically, the conflicts in speeches where the *logos* shows its coercive and binding power to the full. Finally, the third refers to the philosophical disputes where speed of thought plays an essential role in influencing listeners’ changing beliefs. The situation that emerges is fairly homogeneous and can be restated in the following way. *Logos* does seem to possess a strong, binding power that justifies the parallel and even substitution by force, but such power emerges within the context of a general contrast where *logos* is always opposed to another *logos*.

In this way the text produces a deep paradox that operates at two levels. Firstly, the description in § 13 shows that language, *i.e.* any type of *logos*, operates at the level of the *doxa* or, more precisely, in competition between opposing *doxai*. Since Gorgias has defined his own speech as *logos* we must conclude that the truth claimed in the Gorgianic speech should always be placed within the sphere of *doxa*. It is therefore an opinion that seems to be true because it is a confutation of a previous opinion, but does not possess the characteristics of an irrefutable truth since it exposes itself to the risk of subsequent confutation once it has been formulated. Secondly, Gorgias’ equivalence between *logos* and necessity, presenting speech itself as a coercive force, produces the second part of the paradox. If Gorgias’ text persuades us that Helen is innocent, it does so by convincing us, among other things that persuasion is identical to

coercion but, as a consequence, also the fact that we are persuaded is “a matter of compulsion”. Since the text reveals the mechanism of the persuasion process, its intention seems to be to put listeners on their guard against the danger of being subjected to it. Indeed, it sets the listener a challenge. (The term *paignion*, which we have already mentioned, can, in fact, be linked to the sphere of *ainigma* as Marie-Pierre Noël has shown¹⁶. This practice not only has great importance in ancient Greek civilization, especially concerning the origins of wisdom, but also a clearly competitive dimension). Only by understanding the paradox concealed within Gorgias’ text will the listener be able to state that he has understood the rules that inspired this game and, in particular, the consequences that derive from it.

Firstly, every functioning of language brings persuasion into play. Secondly, every attempt to persuade others with and through language must be seen as a competitive practice. Thirdly, regardless of how skilled the speaker may be rhetorically, his words will inevitably come under discussion. Fourthly, at the same time, whoever has a command of language takes part in its power but cannot monopolize it. Lastly, the acquisition of this skill, especially with its metalinguistic dimension, therefore seems to be absolutely necessary for citizens in a democratic society. Because, in fact, the very essence of democracy is the right to politically challenge authorities and bid for a share of power, and the contest for the power must be conducted in symbols rather than with fists or guns, we need rhetorical skill for that contest. On the one hand, indeed, it is only the use of *logos* that allows a person to enter the political sphere fully without the necessity of additional technical knowledge while, on the other hand, they must be subject to this same *logos*. Only through the opposition of different opinions is it possible to produce social consensus upon which the survival of the city is based, even though this consensus is always fleeting and unstable. Thus, if my interpretation of Gorgias’ text is correct, the three elements whose interaction led to the origins of rhetoric are presented very clearly. I shall briefly summarize the main points. Knowledge is plural and this has two related and inevitable consequences. What I regard as knowledge is just an opinion, but it is not necessary to abandon the concept of truth. I

16 Marie-Pierre Noël, “L’enfance de l’art. Plaisir et jeu chez Gorgias”, *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé*, vol. 1, n° 1, 1994, p. 71-93.

merely have to recognize that it is a provisional truth which can always, in principle, be refuted. This situation is like the two sides of a coin. On the one hand, there is a tragic side because I know that my knowledge is only probable, and I may always be wrong but I nevertheless have to decide and act. On the other hand, there is a competitive side because, in the public sphere of social interactions, my opinion is faced with a plurality of other opinions and, to be able to express it, I have to compete and try to win the argument by persuading the other interlocutors.

RETURNING TO THE PRESENT

Lastly, I would like to return briefly to our own society. Faced with a situation of aggregative pluralism that prioritizes efficiency over participation, citizens have adopted one of following three approaches: they have abandoned politics almost completely and concentrated on accumulating private benefits; they have retreated into a homogeneous community that rejects the radically pluralist *ethos* of the public arena; or they have resorted to violent means of expressing opinions which, they feel, are otherwise marginalized and ignored by those who wield political power. As an answer to the undeniable crisis of political participation, two very different theoretical options have therefore emerged.

In their concern with the authenticity of autonomous consent, supporters of deliberative democracy follow Jürgen Habermas' notion that political deliberation ought to approximate to the condition of practical discourse¹⁷; it should be a formal, idealized type of communication that is not oriented strategic action—aimed at the pursuit of success by imposing one's views and will upon others—but rather an attempt to achieve understanding and coordinated action on the basis of rational arguments. This model is opposed to the conception of democratic interaction as strategic bargaining and interest aggregation, in which coercion and rhetorical manipulation, rather than the rationality of the best argument, determine the outcome.

17 See: Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997.

On the contrary, postmodern theorists like Chantal Mouffe while recognizing the fundamental importance of disagreement and accepting that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, argue that this disagreement, and particularly moral disagreement, can never be resolved through rational discourse, because the different positions that constitute the conflict are based on irrational claims. Therefore, from another point of view, they reproduce the dichotomy between reason and emotion, which does not exist in a rhetorical perspective. As Mouffe says: “To accept the view of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity. It is more a sort of conversion than a process of rational persuasion (in the same way as Thomas Kuhn has argued that adherence to a new scientific paradigm is a conversion)¹⁸”. Both these models seem to be an inadequate way of challenging the requirements of citizenship in a world of persistent conflict, where human beings are faced with complex ethical situations in which certainty is impossible and ignorance is exacerbated by individualistic ways of knowing.

On the one hand, deliberative democracy is closely linked to the idea of persuasion, but does not take into due consideration the problem of the asymmetry that occurs in any communicative interaction. Agonistic democracy, on the other hand, enhances the idea of conflict, but completely ignores rationality. However, rhetoric with its emphasis on conflict and the competitive nature of rational deliberation provides the basis for developing an alternative model. Such a model takes into account the fact that rhetorical and argumentative skills inevitably generate power in communicative contexts and all decisions have a provisional character. We have to recognize the contingency and finitude of one’s own beliefs and interests.

18 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London, Verso, 2000, p. 102.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, a brief comparison between Kant's and Arendt's idea of rhetoric will allow me to reformulate my point. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant, whose disdain for rhetoric is well-known, writes:

Oratory, insofar as by that is understood the art of persuasion, *i.e.*, of deceiving by means of a beautiful illusion (as *ars oratoria*), and not merely skill in speaking (eloquence and style) is a dialectic, which borrows from the art of poetry only as much as is necessary to win the minds over to the advantage of the speaker before they can judge and *to rob them from their freedom*; thus it cannot be recommended either for the courtroom, or for the pulpit (Kant, CJ, 5:327, my emphasis).

His position, clearly reminiscent of Plato's attack on rhetoric, is absolutely clear: where there is rhetoric, there is no freedom. By contrast, Arendt affirms that the rhetorical arguments of our fellow citizens free us and rhetoric, as the daily practice of public speech, is the condition of our freedom. It opens up the world to us in a new way and reveals the ancient *polis* in terms of an on-going experience of equality entirely devoid of mastery and servitude, where to be free meant to be free from the inequality of rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed¹⁹.

While I would be inclined to prefer this interpretation of rhetoric, it still seems to be inadequate since it is based on Arendt's misguided insistence on an untenable distinction between the political (action and pluralism) and the social (pre-political violence).

Instead—as I hope to have shown—rhetorical knowledge is an intermediate way of knowing, lying somewhere between the extremes of absolute certainty and absolute arbitrariness or between the incompatible state of freedom and violence. Based on a sense of the radical fallibility of human beings, rhetorical knowledge is an ongoing process rather than a completed state. From a tragic point of view, rhetorical deliberation can always be made more inclusive and citizens can always expand their

19 Linda Zerilli, "'We Feel Our Freedom': Imagination and Judgement in the Thought of Hannah Arendt", *Political Theory*, vol. 33, n° 2, 2005, p. 158-188.

sympathetic capacities further. As a result, the outcomes will always lack metaphysical certainty and be subject to reversal. Therefore, the knowledge produced by an active citizenship enacted through a rhetorical framework is regarded as provisional rather than final. In our confused society, where pluralism and contingency are watchwords, where we need to face precariousness and uncertainty, this is the knowledge we need.

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