Rhetorical Acosmism and Radical Democracy

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ABSTRACT The controversy between philosophy and rhetoric is above all also a political controversy, i.e. a controversy about the very nature of politics. Whereas philosophy defines politics as policy, as the art of leading and controlling an already established state, rhetoric understands the political as the agonal field of the self-creation of society.

KEYWORDS Rhetoric, philosophy, politics, acosmism

In his book La Mésentente. Politique et philosophie, which came out in 1995, Jacques Rancière tries to redefine political philosophy. What is called ‘political philosophy’ in our philosophy departments is, from his point of view, restricted to the question of whether the classical positions of political thinking from Plato to Rousseau are compatible with the discourses of legitimating our so-called western liberal democracies. Political philosophy understood in this way makes the differentia specifica of the political invisible. It harmonises with a kind of politics which is increasingly limited to the adaptation of the society to the requirements of globalised markets. Real politics and the political theory of late modernity meet in the depoliticisation of politics.

Against this tendency, Rancière pleads for the return of an approach to the political which is closely connected with the concept of an irresolvable conflict. The kind of politics which deserves this name cannot be restricted to the boundaries of an institution, but coincides with the permanent struggle for the drawing of these boundaries. Authentic political practices do not only follow established rules, but attempt to debate them permanently. In this perspective, the political stands for radical democracy, for a fundamental controversy in which everything is at stake: the subject of the controversy, the criteria with which the controversy could be settled as well as the identity of the parties involved. The actual point of the political controversy is who and what can take part in the conflict. Politics therefore exists only because of the controversy about the existence and the definition of the political, it exists only as politics of politics. As an example for a political quarrel in Rancière’s sense I would like to interpret the ancient, but of course not only ancient controversy between philosophers and rhetoricians.
The status of the controversy

In this debate, almost everything is at stake, too: the status of the controversy as well as the identity of the arguing parties. It is by no means certain that prior to the conflict between them there is something like philosophy and rhetoric as such, or that there is a fixed borderline between both disciplines. During the centuries the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric shifts in many ways. Both disciplines criticise one another, are in constant dispute and occasionally exchange their roles. For example Plato and Aristotle claim the autonomy of philosophy from rhetoric, but at the same time they deny any autonomy of rhetoric from philosophy. For the philosophers the border is only semi permeable, one can cross the line only in one direction. The rhetoricians do not believe in the existence of a fix border. Cicero criticises the “senseless, useless and reproachable separation between language [lingua] and heart [cor], which led to the fact that some taught us how to think and others how to talk” (De oratore, III, 61). In contrast to this, philosophers insist on the possibility of fixing the boundaries, which manifests itself for instance in the differentiation between rational argumentation and pre-rational persuasion.

In 427 the art of rhetoric was established in the Greek mother country by Gorgias, a student of Empedocles. The art of speaking was brought to Athens by a stranger from the colonies, who was not allowed to participate actively in the political life. Plato on the other hand, the most important opponent of Gorgias, comes from the old Athenian aristocracy, whose members held some important governmental positions. From a historical point of view, the fight between rhetoricians and philosophers can be understood as the fight between two political groups: the one which participates in the political life of the Polis and the one which is not allowed to participate. Rancière interprets the Sophistic criticism of philosophy as an early defence of the political. He points out a fundamental scene of this criticism: the argument stated by Thrasymachos in the Politeia against Socrates, justice is nothing but “the advantage of the higher classes” (Politeia 338c), a strategy of the possessors to legitimise their property against the poor. Socrates’ attempt to refute this argument presupposes a Polis without injustice and social contradictions; it abstracts from an actual material and economic inequality, which constitutes the life of the Polis. A police-like policy finds its theoretical reflection in a political philosophy which is restricted to manage and supervise a community within established parameters as well as to protect these parameters against their repoliticisation.
When Gorgias comes to Athens he finds a historical situation which was nevertheless very favourable for the art of speaking. In 510 the last tyrant was banished. A republic was proclaimed whose democracy was based on two pillars: isonomia (equality before the law) and isegoria (freedom of speech). The unit of the Polis very much depends on the freedom of speech; ultimately, the Polis is nothing but a continuing public discussion in which all free citizens can participate. The assembly of the citizens (ekklesia) gave laws and supervised their observance.

With Plato’s philosophy, the Greek culture of eu legein, of speaking well in the broadest sense, splits up. This splitting constitutes philosophy and rhetoric in our current sense: the Greek logos disintegrates into pure reason (the nous as the rational insight into the essence of things), which is the subject of philosophy, and into bare speech (the onoma), which is left to rhetoric. Plato’s introduction of a prediscursive capacity of intuitive insight into the very nature of things (nous) is the main cause for splitting the logos into a philosophical and a rhetorical part. Philosophy finds itself by turning away from language. This can be shown in Plato’s late dialogues which develop a criticism of the logos, which is accused of being insufficient in reaching the ideas.

Plato tries to define the debate between rhetoric and philosophy as a theoretical controversy about the conditions of the possibility of truth and knowledge. In contrast, Gorgias and Isocrates understand the dispute as a political or practical controversy dealing with the right interpretation of the very core of the Polis. So the subject of the controversy is at first the status of the controversy itself. While philosophers accuse rhetoricians of denying any objective truth which could settle the controversy, the rhetoricians vice versa accuse the philosophers of denying the political in their search for objectivity. From a rhetorical point of view, the political is a synonym for the impossibility of settling the dispute.

Philosophy and rhetoric can only constitute and stabilise themselves by criticising one another. Isolated from one another they remain incomplete. Philosophy oscillates between an absolute freedom of calling everything into question which seems to be evident or commonplace on the one hand, and the search for last reasons on the other. Rhetoric stresses the never-ending open dispute, which coincides, however, with universalising effects. A real dispute can only work if the opponents claim a universal validity for their theses. Because of this complementary relation it will always be possible to describe philosophy as a rhetorical strategy: as a rhetoric of an extra-rhetorical evidence or timeless truth. The other way round, one can always understand “Rhetoric as Philosophy” – the title of an essay by Ernesto Grassi (see Grassi, 1987); rhetorical thought as such has philosophical implications.
Whereas the rhetorician focuses on the controversy as an event and performance, the philosopher places himself on the side of its settlement and thus on the winner’s side. Chaim Perelman characterises the strategy of the philosopher as follows: „If two man defend opposing theses on the same issue, at least one of them is irrational since he is necessarily mistaken; all disagreement is a sign of error and proves that seriousness is lacking. Neither rationalism nor empiricism, which have dominated modern philosophy, can, from this point of view, give any place to rhetoric, except as a technique of presenting ideas and putting them in form.“ (Perelman, 1968: 17) The philosopher tends to present himself as a mask, persona or speaking tube through which something trans-subjective appears; in opposition to that the rhetorician understands himself as a position or function in a social field, which is closed and agonal at the same time. While the rhetorician urges us to bear the dissension, the philosopher wishes to overcome it.

**Philosophical and rhetorical politics**

Since ancient times philosophy and rhetoric were related to different concepts of politics. Jean-Pierre Vernant (see Vernant, 1962) convincingly attributes the origin of Greek thinking to the emergence of a consciousness of the political, which follows the crisis of sovereignty and palace-economics at the beginning of the 7th century AD. Rhetoric and philosophy arise out of the spirit of the Polis. Inside the Polis politics assumes “the shape of an agon: a speech tournament, a battle fought with arguments”. The rhetoricians affirm this agon unreservedly. From their point of view, the Polis is based “on a remarkable supremacy of the spoken word over all other instruments of power”. There is a strong connection between politics and an agonal as well as public logos. Each political opinion stands for an individual position in a social field of forces, which as a whole cannot be taken in from any position. The conflict is, as Heraclitus writes, the father of all things. Aristotle characterises political practice in his Rhetoric as the realm of contingency. Politics has to do “only with such things, which can behave in two different ways: nobody would discuss any matters which cannot be or become different.” (Rhet. 1357a) But the realm of political practice, of “that which can become different” (Rhet. 1140a) is very restricted in Aristotle’s thought. Like his teacher Plato, he is primarily interested in what is timelessly valid, in the immovable, which is the basis of all (and of course also of the political) movement. Philosophy serves here as a meta-political police, which controls the political conflict from outside. By no means every element of human practice is allowed to become different.
Philosophy breaks with the rhetorical thought of immanence. The philosopher plays a double role. At first the philosopher also participates in the public discussions; he goes to the agora. His place is in the centre of the society, where he rejects commonplaces. Socrates commits himself more to ignorance than to knowledge. At the same time the philosopher occupies a position beyond human practice: the position of a *bios theoretikos* or a *vita contemplativa*. By participating in the world of the gods and the ideas, he inherits exactly that kind of sovereignty whose decline was the starting-point of the Polis as an idea and a social reality. The philosopher would like to show the political dispute its place, fix its borders and firmly establish the conditions of its possibility. He acts like a legislator. Plato’s political philosophy embodies the laws of the Polis in the laws of the cosmos. The correspondence between both orders is guaranteed by an authoritative legislator. Plato imagines such a legislator in his famous philosopher-king. This philosopher-king destroys the traditional and contingent order of the community and reconnects the released elements. Plato anticipates the totalitarianisms of the 20th century in the field of his political theory. In his *Poliêia*, all connections of family and culture are being destroyed, in order to establish a new hierarchical order which mirrors the timeless orders of micro- and macrocosm. At the level of the microcosm, the political order represents the order of the soul; at the level of the macrocosm, it represents the hierarchy of idea and appearance. Metaphysics and politics are allied in a fatal way.

It would obviously be naive to describe philosophy in itself as anti-democratic and rhetoric as democratic. In the early rhetoric tradition one can find justifications of monarchy, as for instance in Isocrates’ deliberative *Nicoles*-speech, as well as justifications of democracy. His monarchistic pleading for the autocracy of the Cypriote king is restrained, however, by the fact that this monarchy is a monarchy within the Polis and strongly influenced by the ideal of the Polis. To live in the Polis means also for the king to accept “the freedom of speech”, and moreover to expose himself to the possibility that his mistakes might be criticised and/or attacked (II 3) In Nicoles’ speech addressed to the Cypriote people, which can be read as an answer to Isocrates’ deliberative speech, the king praises the logos and the rhetoric: “Because nature gave us the capacity to persuade each other and to communicate our needs and desires to each other, we are not only distant from living the life of animals, but we have come together, have founded towns, have given ourselves laws, have invented the arts; it is the ability to speak which helps us with all our inventions and institutions […]. If I were to summarise the power of language briefly, it will become clear that no reasonable action happens without the help of language, but that language guides us in all our doings and thinking and that the most reasonable of mankind use it at most. Therefore people who dare to
inveigh against the teachers of rhetoric and philosophy are to be hated as much as people who blaspheme against the gods” (III 6-9). In this quote the highest sovereignty belongs to the logos which is in itself political, and not to the king or to the gods.

In Protagoras and Thucydides one can find explicit justifications of democracy. In the Platonic dialogue of the same name, Protagoras demands the participation of all people in the political sphere and points out the educational and socialising benefits of a general political participation. Thucydides, a student of Isocrates, puts the following praise of democracy into Pericles’ mouth: "We [= the Athenians] have a constitution, which does not depend on the laws of others; we are rather the model for others than that we copy others. Our constitution is called democracy, because it is not only based on a few, but on the majority of the citizens. Before the law all citizens are given equal rights in their personal quarrels” (II 37; 40f.).

The controversy between philosophy and rhetoric, which determines the occidental culture until today, is above all also a political controversy, i.e. a controversy about the very nature of politics. Whereas philosophy defines politics as policy, as the art of leading and controlling an already established state, rhetoric understands the political as the agonal field of the self-creation of society.

**Rhetorical Aocosmism**

Philosophy tries to embody human practice in a timeless cosmic order. In contrast to this, rhetoric articulates an acosmistic position. This becomes evident in Gorgias’ speech about the non-being, which is equally responsible for his fame and his dubious reputation. This speech was interpreted again and again as an example for the absurdity of rhetorical school-speeches. Gorgias develops the triple thesis “that there is nothing, secondly, that, if there were something, human beings would not be able to recognise it, and thirdly that if there were something which we could recognise we could not communicate it to someone else.” (Sextus Empiricus, *adv. math.* 7, 65) Perhaps this position appears less absurd if we start from the third point, the uncommunicability of everything. Gorgias explains this point as follows: “That with which we mean something is the language, but language is not the existing or being [*logos de ouk esti ta hypokeimena kai onta*]. Thus we do not signify anything to our fellow creatures, but we signify language, which is not the same as being.” (adv. math. 7, 84) This argument is as simple as it is irresistible. When we speak, we never say the being as such (in the sense of those who postulate an extra-lingual being), but always only words. We speak words and not any being. A being could not be said as a matter of principle. Each attempt to
say the being itself would only produce new words again, which remove us even more from
the presence of that being. So the being finally appears as an effect of words: Certainly
“speech is derived from the things which come to us from the outside, which we perceive.
Touching a liquid substance, for instance, leads to the formation of the corresponding
expression, and the perception of a colour elicits the corresponding word. If this is true, then
speech is not a representation of the exterior, but the exterior becomes a representation of
speech.” (adv. math. 7, 85) Not the words designate the things, but the things mark the words
and thus become indications or signs themselves. The being disappears behind the horizon of
the logos. There is nothing outside of language. Therefore language does not exist in the same
sense as the being (onta) or the fundamental (hypokeimen) in philosophy and commonsense:
“Certainly, one cannot say either that speech exists in the same way as the visible and the
audible, so that the fundamental and the being could be deduced from speech as something
being and fundamental. Because even if speech exists [...], it differs from all other existing
things” (adv. math. 7, 86). Speech (or logos) does not exist like a thing, because we are
always within the language; language cannot be treated as an object. For ancient rhetoric,
there is no point of view beyond the logos, so the logos as a whole remains completely
unfathomable. Rhetoric cannot be considered as a meta-language; because it is nothing else
but language, rhetoric can only explore the field of language with linguistic means.
Gorgias’ acosmism is closely connected with his theory of the persuasive and performative
force of language which he develops in his Encomium of Helen (see Hetzel, 2003). Gorgias
pleads for Helen’s innocence, who was accused to be guilty of the Trojan War. Only three
forces could have brought Helen to Troy: kidnapping by force, a resolution of the Gods or the
seducing power of a speech. Gorgias compares the power of language with the power of the
gods. Human beings cannot resist any of these powers. Speech can only become a peithous
demiourgos or megas dynastes because it does not force us. Rhetorical persuasion works
without necessity, it works because it can always fail. Protachos says in Plato’s dialogue
Philebos: “I often heard Gorgias, distinguishing the art of persuasion [peithein] from all other
arts, because in rhetoric everything is done freely and willingly, but not forcedly, and so it is
the best of all arts” (Philebos 5a-b) The ability of peithein lies in convincing rather than force.
It seduces us and offers us an opportunity for a free agreement.
Some remarks by Quintilian can be interpreted within the framework of this theory of non-
vioent persuasion. Quintilian distinguishes linguistic expressions from actions and bare
sounds because the former require confirmation: “If something needs to be confirmed [si quid
confirmationem desideravit], the craftsman will also speak [dicet], if he has to speak about his
product, and the musician will speak, if he must speak about his music; he does not become a
rhetorician, but he will do it like a rhetorician” (inst. or. II 21, 17). In this respect, to talk
about the music and about the action differ from the music and the action themselves. Speech
always appears where we leave the realm of forgone conclusions, timeless ideas,
transcendental frames, commonplaces and natural evidences, where a claim of validity is
articulated, which requires confirmation. After Celsus, whom Quintilian quotes here as an
authority, “the rhetorician will only talk about things which are questionable.” (inst. or. III 5, 3)
So rhetoric is always connected with contingency. With this argument Quintilian rejects
Plato’s assertion that knowledge must precede talking about things, or in other words, that
only the one who knows, i.e. the philosopher, is allowed to use speech. Quintilian simply
denies any knowledge before the public fight for confirmation and acknowledgement.
Knowledge as such is called into question; it is referred to a never-ending linguistic debate
about contentious claims of validity.
It is not the allegedly unconstraint obligation of the better argument in the sense of Jürgen
Habermas which forms the centre of the Greek peithein, but a free offer for agreement which
constitutively can always be refused. Precisely because there is no logical necessity to agree,
we become disposed to agree: rather enticed than forced. In our everyday life, it is usually not
the ‘striking’ arguments which convince us. If we get involved in the game of argumentation,
we lose all logical a-priori-foundations and evidences. Chaim Perelman writes: “The very fact
that we give reasons for a thesis means that the thesis is not evident and obligatory for all”
(Perelman, 1980: 141). Only the non-binding quality of the peithein can bind us, only its
powerlessness constitutes its power.

NOTES

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