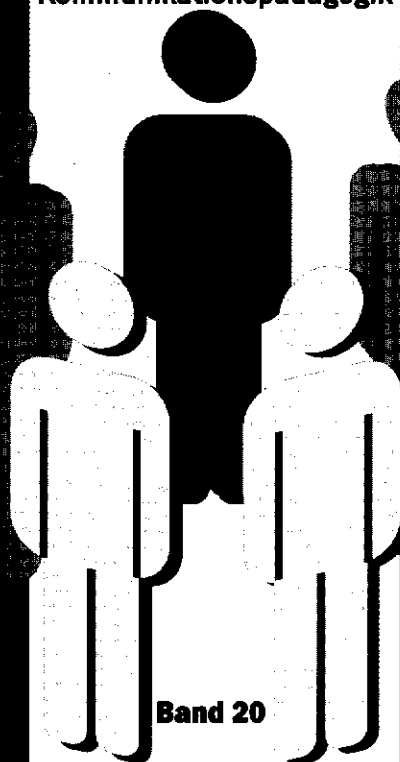Henner Barthel
Kevin M. Carragee (Eds.)

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Political Change – Without Rhetorical Consequences?

The relationship between rhetoric and politics is manifold and reciprocal. Basically, a safe assumption would seem to be that the number of various rhetorical modes is equal to the number of types of political organizations. On closer examination, however, this assumption looks more like fantasy than reality, for not every political change has rhetorical consequences. What is to blame for this perception? A superficial understanding of politics or an inadequate conception of rhetoric? Inadequate indeed if the conception is based entirely on the rhetoric of speeches, of oration per se, and ignores the "rhetoric of discussion and debate." As far as possible within this paper, I propose to attempt an answer to this question, relying in particular on examples from modern and recent German history.

The study of political change need not focus exclusively on the form of government. In his treatise, On Rhetoric, Aristotle (1365b) distinguished among "four forms: democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy and monarchy". Here, in contrast to the extensive treatment of this subject in The Republic (Politeia), he simply associates each form directly with one of three social groups: the common people, the owners of property, or the educated keepers of the law. Monarchy undergoes a further subdivision between the law-based rule of a "kingdom" and the unlimited power of "tyranny." Further, he stresses the importance of knowing the mores, laws and advantages that serve the aims of each form of government, because only from this point of view can the appropriate "means of persuasion" be

found. He considers this "means of persuasion" the central point of rhetoric and defines it as "the faculty that apprehends the possible means of persuasion in any given case" (1355b).

A speaker who wants to persuade must speak in the presence of others. Thus the aim, the *"telos,"* of a speech lies in the effect that it has on the listeners. Aristotle says as much. To the three elements of speaker, subject of the speech, and the person to whom the speech is addressed, he adds the following key theoretical refinement: "and the speech's end in view is the person to whom the speech is addressed, i.e. the listener" (1358b). When he says, "The intention aims for the purpose" (1366a), then, the purpose rests with the listener, and thus he is consistent in letting the listeners decide the genre of the speech.

Aristotle identifies three possible roles or functions for the listeners as members of the popular assembly: to advise on what is to be done, to determine what has happened or to weigh the appropriateness of what has been said. "From this there must follow three genres of address: the advisory, the juridical and the (so-called) 'oratorical showpiece.' The juridical genre (*genos dikanikon / genus iudicale*) concerns prosecution and defense under the law. The epideictic genre (*genos epideiktikon / genus demonstrativum*) concerns praise and blame according to the aesthetics of everyday custom (cf. Walker 2000). And the deliberative genre (*genos symbouleutikon / genus deliberativum*) concerns advising to pursue or avoid a course of action according to personal conviction, "for one or the other of these is always the aim of those who either counsel privately or take the floor in the popular assembly." Counsel may therefore be imparted not only in a public address, but also in a conversation. Unlike a formal speech, a conversation allows the *symbouleuesthai* – mutual consultation – to be carried out immediately. This is shown, for example, by the Sicilian "Bouleuteria" that have been preserved.

Referring to a comment by Socrates in the Phaidros, (261a), Quintilian concludes that "rhetoric exists not only in trials and popular assemblies, but also in private and public life-situations" (2, 21, 4). Already in the pre-Socratic *dissoi logoi* the following injunction is to be found: A man "must simply be able to conduct a conversation" (*brachu dialegesthai*) and "speak in public" (*damagorein*). The Sophists of Asia Minor practiced both and, in contrast to the dogmatic value system of the aristocracy, pursued the truth in public exercise of "point and counterpoint." In the play of diction and contradiction, argument is born, which, as a search for the truth, "sets science itself in motion" (Tenbruck 1976). Thus very early there is, besides the rhetoric of the formal address, also a rhetoric of conversation; even Socrates was a conversational rhetorician.

In the Sophistical Refutations Aristotle names four kinds of conversation: didactic, dialectic, investigative and eristic, mentioning that he has treated the apodictic elsewhere. Because he draws dialectical conclusions even from probable premises, he recognizes not only the "bad" *doxai* of the eristicians, but also – as he argues in the Topics – the "good" premises of the reasoned thinkers (cf. Toulmin 1986). Two centuries later Cicero distinguishes between the conversational forms of *"sermones"* and *"disputationes,"* both of which are trumped by *"contentio:"* vigorous dispute. Diogenes Laertes, in the 3rd century A.D., identifies fourteen genres of dialogue. To sum up then, despite various approaches to a rhetoric of conversation, no thorough-going *techne* of conversational rhetoric seems to have been developed in the ancient world, at least according to the available sources, which, it must be pointed out, have suffered the loss of the writings on sophistical doctrine (Geißner 1996b).

In the centuries since then the forms of government have changed. New forms have arisen, not only forms based on seizing and maintaining control of the state, but also on actions directed by multilateral interests. These

narrower or broader concepts of the political have their matching narrower or broader concepts of the rhetorical. There is no single, definitive rhetoric, just as there is no single, definitive politics; both concepts are contingent on historical process. True, many fantasize a "natural" connection between democracy and rhetoric, but rhetoric exists even under tyrannical forms of government (Steinbrink 1976, 287), and besides: Is there not in democracy as well an "invisible but effective tyranny?" (Deetz 1990). Apart from the three basic models developed in the Agora and the Forum, other, local forms have been developed that serve specific purposes of specific interest groups in specific places – situations in which the juridical model would not be appropriate: ecclesiastical pronouncements [e.g. papal bulls and encyclicals]; didactics ["disdaskalia"]; parliamentary rhetoric; military rhetoric; economic, industrial and organizational rhetoric; the rhetoric of publishing and the media; the "electronic rhetoric" of the Internet. (Selnow 1998; Welch 1999). This list alone might indicate a change in the conception of rhetoric. Then there is the speech of the powerful and the princes, courtiers and officials who are beholden to them: the situationally powerful agents. They have – by whatever legitimacy – the right to speak and to oblige others at least to answer (for example in hearings, interrogations, (cross-)examinations, oaths), if not to obey. Here, in such situations, the asymmetrical rhetoric of the oration holds its place down to the present day. But already in Cicero one finds symmetrical conversations everywhere in aristocratic circles, and in the universities of the Middle Ages there are disputations between the clerics, the formal structure of which, as *ars colloquendi* or *ars disputandi*, gradually finds its way into the knights' academies and from there into the schools for the upper classes, so that the pupils could be prepared for the duties of their "higher calling." Basically it was a matter of exclusive conversational processes for members of the lettered elite (cf. Geißner 1998).

Not until the 18th century did a "rhetoric of conversation" develop among the "enlightened" bourgeoisie (Fauser 1999). Its precepts were intended to promote the development of "free sociability." The defeudalization in the years immediately after the French Revolution radically changed this – after all – still feudal conversational ideal. (Salons in Berlin, women's romanticism in Jena. More and more emancipated citizens, men and women of the bourgeoisie, wanted to join the conversation.) The political participation that found its rhetorical voice in the period leading up to the revolutions of the 1848 could not be stifled by the feudal reaction that came afterward. The fourth estate was becoming ever more involved in the discussion, building labor associations and socialist parties.

Only after the founding of the Second German Empire in the beginning of 1871 did the political parties really begin to compete and negotiate directly with each other, both inside and outside Parliament, but this confrontation and encounter was no longer exclusively between persons of distinction but now also among the "common people." The Kaiser's attitude toward his parliament was revealed in the following statement: "It is all the same to me whether it is red, black or yellow monkeys hopping around in the Reichstag-cage." After the dismissal of Bismarck, careless remarks from the throne got the Kaiser and his "Volk" deeper and deeper into international trouble, which finally came to an end with the German defeat in World War I.

In 1918 the discussions in the worker- and soldier-councils of several German cities were the first steps toward the Weimar Republic. To be sure, not only the more conservative German National and Liberal Parties had orators – the Social Democrats and the Spartacus-Federation too had their designated public speakers, but many people felt encouraged by the liberation from the command-and-obey ethos (of the Wilhelmine era) and

new voices started to be heard in the meetings and to join the debates. In many groups, the rhetorical pendulum swung from the speech to the conversation, even if this could not be called a general trend. Women too were involved in large numbers, having finally gained the right to vote under the new constitution. Besides the women who became famous as speakers, thousands of others were vocal in federations and associations, discussing the foundation of their work and its public acknowledgment. Already at the turn of the century there had been experiments in secondary schools based on conversations between students and meant to involve them in running the schools' administration. The influence of John Dewey's pedagogy was unmistakable here. Now, in the schools of the Weimar Republic, debates were considered a necessary preparation for political participation. (Schönbrunn 1930, 24-29)

Political parties, the women's movement and pedagogy are only three examples of social contexts in which conversation became more important than speeches. When there is no longer anyone declaring a unity "from above" and imposing it with force, when this counterfeit unity crumbles, then suppressed interests, needs and wishes show themselves, especially the interests of the heretofore oppressed. This manifests itself wherever various interests encounter each other, where an issue is contested and a common course of action must be forged. Here people must talk to each other if they wish to avoid violence. In such situations they should attempt "to awaken a willingness for cooperation, to create a will for it, so that cooperative action can be taken" (Geißner 1979, 23 and 1996, 400).

These words stake out the realm of processes of "rhetorical communication," a concept that subsumes conversational and oratorical rhetoric. Conversational rhetoric consists of dialogical forms that manifest in real-time spoken exchanges toward the goal of transforming social conditions through cooperative activity. The forms of oratorical rhetoric, on

the other hand, are only implicitly dialogical because they are inherently one-sided. Although oratorical rhetoric has received and continues to receive much more scholarly attention, conversational rhetoric wins hands down when it comes to quantity and quality of material, especially in mass democracies, where the consultation and deliberation predominate.

After the First World War, despite the Treaty of Versailles, the economic crisis, political murders by reactionary groups (der Freikorps) and a clandestine arms build-up, a relationship between conversation and democracy did start to develop, however, tentatively. But the beginnings were undermined by increasing unemployment and manipulations by the interests of capital, and finally smashed by the radically oratorical party that came to power. This party's leader had early, already as an "educational officer" for the National Socialists, staked his career on rhetorical agitation. He developed a style of speaking whose potent innovation was to combine the proletarian and the military forms of appeal. Imprisoned after the failed coup of 1923 in Munich, he wrote the following: "The force that has unleashed the great religious and political upheavals has been since time immemorial the spellbinding power of the spoken word. The broad masses of a people are subject only to the power of speech." (Mein Kampf, 116; cf. Burke 1941). The movement he founded was "in its essence and according to its inner organization antiparliamentarian" (378). Thus, the party set up "public speaking schools" in which thousands of propagandists were trained (cf. Bytwerk 1981). They pursued a two-pronged aim: to win over volkish comrades for the idea of National Socialism, and to demonize the unrooted riffraff and internationalist Jews. After they seized power in 1933, there was just one more occasion when public contradiction was allowed, the plebiscite for the "enabling law." Once the first concentration camps were set up, nay-sayers were not only silenced but, eventually, killed off. It may have been

that before and even during the Second World War the top political cadres, the leading industrialists, the bishops and abbes and the general staffs of the military had their collegial discussions – in the closed system of the Third Reich there was nothing for common people to discuss. It was obligatory for everyone to listen to Hitler's addresses, and when he had finished, to intone in chorus: "Leader command, we will follow you." The "power of the speech" feeds on the "powerlessness of the bound listeners" (Geißner 1973). Thus the command-machine rolled on unobstructed into "total war" and (apart from resistance groups) into the Holocaust.

Already in 1933 a German teacher had written: "discussion is a form of movement within civil society. It is the search for compromise; the National Socialist recognizes no opposition, only the people and its enemies, and therefore knows neither discussion nor compromise" (H. E. Günther). After the end of the war, a reeducation began, often already in the Western POW camps. This education tried to establish (reestablish?) the consciousness and experience of the relationship between "freedom of opinion and democracy." It took a while for it to sink in that things like "discussion and debate" actually exist. It had to be learned, whether anew or for the first time, that people can talk about their problems, solicit the opinions of others and come to a consensus concerning what might be the best solution. It had to be learned that disputes need not end in violence or be referred to a higher authority, but that people could use evidence and argument to resolve things themselves. And people had to learn not only to express themselves in writing, but to "speak up" which is not a permanent attribute acquired in a one-time act, but a situation-dependent process.

To say "they had to learn to speak up," raises the question of just who was able to do this, along with the related question: For what reason might someone or some group not be able to learn this, or not be allowed to learn

it? Has there been any change in this situation, or is "Encouragement toward Freedom" still necessary? (Geißner 1990)

These questions, and others like them, are resurfacing in view of the very different political development after 1945 in East Germany which, judged from today's point of view, could be described as the failed attempt to build a "socialistic people's democracy." As late as 1976 the program of the only official party, the SED, contained the following article of faith: "Under the leadership of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany a foundational turn toward Socialism was accomplished in the German Democratic Republic [...] In socialism the scientific world view of the working class, Marxism-Leninism, is the ruling ideology." As the "revolutionary avant-garde of the proletariat" the party is, as a centralized organization, shaped by the "operational mode of mechanized heavy industry." According to Lenin, the decisive rhetorical means of persuasion are not discussion but rather "agitation and propaganda." They include "as forms of rhetorical, party-sponsored communication in the GDR those communicative processes carried out under party mandate in businesses, institutions and organizations, as well as in residential areas for the purpose of explaining, justifying or implementing political measures and to inculcate [implant] official party doctrine and ideology in the 'socialist consciousness' of the people" (Beck 1991, 138).

Here also, as is so often the case in closed systems, a double strategy is pursued: "propagation of Marxism-Leninism" and an "uncompromisingly aggressive struggle against bourgeois and revisionist ideology" (Methodology of Political Education, 7). Speeches from the State Council and pseudo-conversations between agitators and propagandists predominate. The crux of their methodology is, according to the URANIA Guidelines for Presenters:

- a class-conscious approach to every problem as the decisive element in socialist processes of education and persuasion
- confirmation and deepening of basic socialist convictions
- representation of the advantages and values of socialism in contrast to capitalism and imperialism (Ernst 1985, 14).

They are pseudo-conversations because they are staged: "People are set up to speak." In this "propagandist explanatory conversation [...] there is no deviation, no compromise," the leader must "adhere to the line." These guidelines are taken further in an Introduction to Socialist Rhetoric: "In bourgeois society debate is a form of speaking characterized by diametrically opposed positions. [...] Debate in this form is no longer possible in a socialist community, because we have attained the political-moral unity of the human being. The insuperable antagonisms of class opposition have been overcome..." (Kurka 1970, 325f.).

These assumptions were contradicted by subsequent historical events. People gathered in subversive discussion groups to consider alternative directions, until they began with the demonstrative rhetoric of silent processions and then moved on to speech choirs in order to ply their resistance to the dogmatic system. An attempt was made to save something of what was experienced in the "subversive," conversational rhetoric of the transition period in a conversational culture of the round-table, but it has failed. It appears that the parliamentary routine of the West German representatives was not sensitive enough to the idea of mutual collaboration on new models for unification of the two German states or development of a new, common constitution. These conversations were squelched by the capitalist "deal."

These kinds of questions about the relationship between political and rhetorical change arise now in the context of debates about Eastern Europe, primarily in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The historical

development of these countries is heterogeneous, as were their systems of government under Soviet influence. But they have one thing in common: They appear to be going through a transition from closed systems of dogmatic discourse to open systems of plural opinions in conversation. It remains to be seen whether the freedom of public speaking and conversation will once again be co-opted by the traditional power elites (politicians, priests, managers) or whether this freedom will be seized by women and men eager to participate in a truly public discourse of consultation and decision. Right now they have a chance to participate in real citizens' movements.

Given adequate technical infrastructure, opinion-pluralism today is not limited to the local speech community. The Internet has changed the world profoundly, and that includes the world of the rulers, too. At any moment (24-7), one has access to unsupervised and uncensored feedback. "The audience can send information back to the source, which never had before been possible on a large scale" (Selnow 1998, 22). Traditional, hierarchical, even military top-down indoctrination must now contend with bottom-up flows of information in open systems. Strictly speaking, there are no "speech rooms" in the Internet, there is only conversation, either thematic discussions, or "chat" (cf. Geißner 2001b).

Profound political and technical changes are transforming the fields of rhetorical communication as well, transforming conversational rhetoric and the rhetoric of speaking. These changes bring the possibility that "the loss of foundation and consensus can be seen as a beginning to rethink our relations, rather than as justification for moves of power and an end of possible discussion." Finally, it is time to bid farewell to "deadening certainty" and to research (and teach) both forms of rhetorical communication "under conditions of indeterminacy" (Deetz 1995, 54f.). Therefore, it is not possible to predict the rhetorical consequences of

political change in fragmented societies. Any consequences will have to be in the transformation of social-pragmatic rhetorical forms, more precisely, in the development of a conversational rhetoric. But for this we will need "deliberative autonomy" for ordinary citizens.

<div align="right">Transl. by John Minderhout, Ann Arbor</div>

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