A new conception of Rhetorical Political Analysis based on questioning and distance

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Recent scholarship has reintroduced rhetoric and argumentation to political analysis. In contrast to traditional approaches to rhetoric which conceive of it as a type of speech, the new scholarship treats rhetoric not only as an object of research but as the basis of an analytical framework for the study of political language. Finlayson, Martin and Atkins have developed this new approach – Rhetorical Political Analysis – to study political language, ideology, and strategy (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013, Finlayson, 2004b, 2007, Finlayson and Martin, 2008, Martin, 2013a, 2013b, ; see also Atkins et al., 2014). Their aim is not only to show the contribution to political science of conceptualising political language as rhetoric, but also to show the benefits of utilising concepts from rhetoric scholarship for analysing political language. The primary emphasis of this approach is on the persuasive dimensions of political language. Work on rhetorical political analysis thus has a counterpart in post-positivist studies of public policy, which emphasize the argumentative nature of policy deliberation as opposed to instrumental-rational models of decision-making (Dryzek, 2010, Fischer, 2003, Fischer and Forester, 1993, Fischer and Gottweis, 2012, Gottweis, 2006, Gottweis, 2012, Griggs and Howarth, 2013, Turnbull, 2013, Zittoun, 2014). What these approaches have in common is that they all see a greater role for rhetoric insofar as it emerges with renewed importance from the acceptance of epistemological contingency and in accounting for the pragmatic aims of political discourse, found in the dynamic exchange between speaker and audience.

We can, therefore, distinguish such positions as constituting an emerging ‘thick’ approach to political rhetoric, distinct from other more limited, or ‘thin’, approaches, which understand rhetoric as a mere technique of speech. Work in this latter conception reflects the traditional idea that rhetoric constitutes a technical discipline concerning the arrangement and delivery of speech, often focused upon oratory [REFs]. However, despite the renewed interest in rhetoric and its extension to a more in-depth analytical approach, in political science most researchers studying political language prefer to use analytical approaches other than rhetoric, preferring instead ‘political communication’, ‘discourse analysis’ or ‘narrative analysis’. These are considered, firstly, more methodologically amenable to scientific investigation, whereas rhetorical analysis is highly interpretive, permitting great variation in the interpretation of meaning and judgement as to the significance of cases. This degree of rhetorical interpretation is interesting and methodologically rich, but it is too broad and too varied to contribute towards a generally applicable analytical framework. Established social science methods for studying language will

always seem more systematised and rigorous than the interpretive version of rhetorical analysis. Secondly, the three accepted approaches above are seen to treat language and ideas in more depth than is implied by the predominant, thin characterisation of rhetoric as occupying the surface territory of language, and thus unworthy of in-depth investigation. While it has even been argued that a generalised ‘rhetorical turn’ can be identified within the social sciences, such that the rhetoric of inquiry constitutes an intellectual movement (Simons, 1990), talk of ‘turns’ is itself little more than strategic intellectual rhetoric and, in any case, evidence of such a trajectory in the social sciences is embarrassingly limited. The thick approach to rhetorical analysis needs to bolstering in both its methodological and substantive dimensions. Currently, the thin theory of rhetoric predominates: rhetoric is appearance, not substance, the decoration, not the cake.

The aim of this paper is to support and extend upon the thick perspective by developing a new conception of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis. At the same time, this aims to effect a shift in the conception of rhetorical analysis to a constructivist account. I introduce a new theory of rhetoric that constitutes a general conception of language, while at the same time embedding rhetoric in a relational account of language, thus supporting the integration of rhetorical analysis with other disciplines and, more importantly, rendering it methodologically compatible with other sub-disciplines of political science. The resulting conception is one that aims to transcend partial theories of political rhetoric in favour of a general view, while at the same time presenting rhetoric as but one aspect of political analysis, and consequently rejecting the view of rhetoric as an autonomous discipline. A thick theory of rhetoric must be extended beyond theories which limit its definition to persuasion and argumentation: it should account for both the figurative and argumentative dimensions of language, and explain how rhetoric is used figuratively to generate unity as much as to bridge differences through deliberation. I explain how a theory of rhetoric grounded in questioning puts the analysis of rhetoric on a more robust footing and elucidate some potential applications of the framework to theories of the state and governance.

The analysis proceeds in three parts. The first part is a critical review of recent scholarship on political rhetoric. It considers both the thin view of rhetoric as an object of political analysis and the thick view that rhetoric can serve as an analytical framework. Taken together, this establishes the importance of rhetoric for political science and points towards the prospects of entrenching rhetoric within a broader conception of political language. I argue that these approaches have limited utility in reaching this goal because rhetoric is under-theorised, restricted to persuasion and conceptualised so as to limit potential integration with other analytical approaches. The second part introduces an original philosophy of rhetoric and argumentation, based in a philosophy of questioning and theory of socio-political distance. I argue that this theory can form the basis of a thick conception of rhetorical analysis, because it extends upon existing approaches and deals with some of their limitations, providing a basis for conceptualising rhetoric that broadens its significance and also supports the integration of the analysis of rhetoric with major sub-disciplines of political science. In the final section, I explain how this constructivist rhetorical analysis offers new insights for our understanding of the language of governance and institutions.

1. Competing conceptions of political rhetoric and argumentation

i) Rhetoric as object of political analysis

Rhetoric has been analysed primarily as an object of political analysis. That is, it has been conceptualised in terms of particular genres of speech or as a set of techniques, frequently limited to oratory, oriented towards persuading an audience in the process of deliberation (Martin, 2013a, Condor et al., 2013), or at best as an accompaniment to argumentation to do with its effectiveness (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012). Political speeches by leaders are the most obvious example. The ability to persuade other political actors and the public has always
been a crucial skill for leaders in elections, in seeking to gain, use and hold on to power on a day-to-day basis (Tulis, 1987), or in parliamentary debate, which concerns persuasion as the force of the better argument and also as a contest between the ethos of opposed leaders [REF Reid 2014]. In democracies, decisions can be robustly questioned after they have been taken, so argumentation serves the purpose of justifying decisions, as much as to search for them (Atkins, 2011). Rhetorical techniques contribute to the persuasive power of ideologies, relevant for both public sphere debates and within party organisations (REF Dommett 2014). Thus they aim for persuasion as ‘inward-facing’ and ‘outward-facing’ discourse that makes arguments and defends against criticisms (Finlayson, 2012, p. 758). Since the advent of television and the internet, persuasion takes place increasingly with regard to multiple audiences simultaneously, for example at party conferences which have served as important opportunities for leaders to persuade both the party membership and the viewing public (Finlayson, Atkins REF).

But there are also many types of rhetoric which do not fit well in this mould. Ceremonial rhetoric is just as important for leaders as deliberation, for example, on occasions like the inaugural address by the President of the US and national celebrations everywhere, in which the object is to praise the people and celebrate their shared identity, or to reframe national identity in particular ways (see, for example, REF Byrne). Rhetoric also becomes important at particular times, such as crises, when leaders are called upon to make great speeches, aiming to reassure and inspire in the face of conflict (Kieve, 1994, Murphy, 2003, Toye, 2013). Can such political rhetoric really be defined as persuasion? To engage in persuasion about the importance of the national identity would be to implicitly put it into question, when that is the opposite of the intended aim. In a time of crisis, to endeavour to persuade an audience would imply that it had a reason to lack confidence, rather than to repress emotional upheaval and restore confidence by reminding it of national strengths and virtues. In such instances, what is at stake is the relationship between the audience members, for example uniting them in a shared national identity, evoked through emotional responses to pleasing discourse. For leaders, what is to be achieved is their identification in regard to the people, such that they may feel confidence and trust. In authoritarian states, ceremonial symbols and language increase to fantastic proportions, because the identity of the people with the leader must be continuously reinforced in the absence of the political right to question. Here, figurative rhetoric prevails over argumentation. Propaganda employs rhetoric to evoke strong emotional identification, rather than engage in rational persuasion (O'Shaughnessy, 2004, p. 16). Such analyses of political speech point to political rhetoric being equally figurative as it is argumentative, and ceremonial as much as deliberative. Rhetoric is always related to legitimation, but this may or may not include the effort to persuade.

This research shows the broad significance of political rhetoric as an object of research, even if it is understood in the most limited way as a set of techniques. Firstly, it is potentially relevant to all fields of political communication, from formal political debates to ceremonial speeches to argumentation in policymaking, and even the informal public sphere outside political institutions (REF Smith 2014). Nor can rhetoric be limited to language alone, because its techniques concern symbols and gestures just as well (Martin, 2013a, p. 9). Secondly, rhetoric is not simply 'used', but reflects more deep-seated aspects of power, from that contained within the knowledge used to support argumentation (logos), to the contest of personalities and their values (ethos) and the appeal to the emotions (pathos), as well as to the meaning of language which frames questions in certain ways rather than others, including figurative rhetoric such as metaphors, through which ideologies are created, identities shared, and power relations sustained without being explicitly formulated and contested (Carver and Pikalo, 2008, Charteris-Black, 2005). Political rhetoric cannot be confined to argumentation (the rhetoric of conflicts) because metaphors and other tropes (the rhetoric of figures) are equally important. Indeed, rhetoric is often intended to pervert the effort to persuade by eliding differences and problematic actions.
Furthermore, the significance of rhetoric can be found in its performative aspect as much as its content (Finlayson and Martin, 2008). By extension, this performative aspect should include the situated practice of speaking, in general, given that it always addresses an audience and the intersubjective relationship between it and the speaker (or author, or producer of the symbol). Therefore, rhetoric should not be separated from the terrain of discourse analysis more generally, given that it requires us to consider the operation of political power through the exchange of symbols and the practice of engaging in such communicative exchanges. The limited view of rhetoric as an object of analysis begins to give way to more complex questions about its role in the construction of political reality and the operation of discursive power.

While this broad view of the scope of rhetoric helps us see its significance, it raises its own set of problems and leads to substantial objections against rhetorical analysis. The first objection is conceptual. We can see that rhetoric applies to many symbolic interactions and circumstances. It is potentially a general view of language, which makes it pertinent for all language everything. Broadly conceived, rhetoric is freed from the bounds of its limited definition as technique, with its accompanying, implicit pejorative classification as trivial. But at the same time, it loses specificity and dissolves into an inchoate dimension of language [REF Gaonkar]. In other words, if rhetoric is everything, then it is also potentially nothing. The second objection is methodological. Rhetoric is clearly a highly interpretive discourse; the audience has a degree of freedom to interpret from its own perspective, and the diversity within the audience ensures that meaning cannot be contained, at least in theory. That is, given that rhetoric supposes, correctly, that language is polysemous, a difficulty enhanced by the multiplication of audiences in the age of broadcasting and the internet, the analysis of both meaning and argumentative strategy becomes methodologically problematic. This methodological difficulty is reflected in the reliance of much research on case studies, given that comparative analyses are difficult to conduct because of the feasibility of making in-depth rhetorical analyses of many cases. and also in struggling to attain validity. More importantly, comparative analyses are particularly problematic given that rhetoric responds to varied temporal and cultural contexts, or ‘rhetorical situations’ [REFs]. One can easily prefer to analyse the situation itself in order to understand its underlying structural possibilities, as political sociology already does well. Furthermore, given the difficulty of inferring the direct effects of any one instance of political language, one could leave aside the analysis of discourse and investigate the reaction of the audience via quantitative surveys of public opinion, in which results are formulated into models backed by probability statistics. Even if one concedes that rhetoric is an everyday reality of politics, its interpretive properties, the difficulty of identifying if and when people are ‘persuaded’, and of what figurative rhetoric actually conjures in the way of imagery, then how are we to measure it? Isn’t this precisely the difference between the social sciences and other humanities, and therefore best left to the latter? But many frameworks for rhetorical analysis do presuppose the necessity of an interpretive epistemology and have sought to borrow such conceptual schemas from the humanities.

This leads to a third methodological objection stemming from an interpretive approach grounded in the agency of individual subjects. Given that rhetoric enables speakers to disguise their intentions, producing a pleasing discourse that will appeal to an audience, the problem arises of how to interpret speakers’ intentions. A key property of rhetoric is that it permits deception, the disguising of intentions so as to please an audience and convince it that the speaker is really on its side. Here, I would support Dowding’s (REF) criticism of interpretivism that rhetoric presents a problem for interpretive methods because rhetoric means we cannot easily infer actors’ beliefs from their words. Now, dealing with this objection raises the question of implicit theories of the consciousness within all analytical frameworks, not just interpretivism. Rhetoric can be studied as though all the words were consciously chosen and reflected upon, however, it has also been analysed for what it says about the psychology of the speaker, as
reflecting unconscious and unreflected-upon ideas and emotions, along with the socialised values entrenched in the speaker’s culture. Many theories of political action avoid the problem by implicitly dividing the consciousness into two parts, one of fixed values and beliefs into which individuals have been socialised and a rational, reflective part that holds the capacity of agency in regard to questions. But a rhetorical analysis shows such a simple demarcation to be a poor model. Indeed, it highlights the fact that the consciousness can even deceive itself, and that it may also, therefore, be ‘rhetorical’ (Meyer, 2000, Turnbull, 2014)(REF Martin 2014). Rhetoric concerns the emotional reaction between speaker and audience, so it concerns both the individual consciousness and intersubjective relations (on psychology and power, see Blaug, 2010). This particular problem is beyond the scope of this paper, however, we do need a way of examining the relationship between a speaker and audience (or author and reader, viewed and viewer) that does not impute a conception of the mind as only either a rational, reflective consciousness or an unreflective cipher. Individual speakers and listeners have agency, but neither can control all the possible interpretations of the other and thus restrict unintended meanings.

In the end, rhetoric is contextual, so what counts is the relationship between speaker and audience, which is set in, and contributes to, the context. Therefore, an interpretive approach grounded in the individual is unable to accommodate all the social and psychological dimensions of the speaker-audience relationship which are essential to rhetoric. This is not to say that interpretive analyses of the intentions behind speeches or in-depth case studies of political rhetoric are irrelevant. But it does imply that delineating the various technical elements of speech, in order to support an analytic methodology of rhetoric as an object, is methodologically problematic. It is also theoretically limited, given the multiple dimensions of rhetorical effects, which reflect the qualities of the speaker, call on the interpretive capacities of the audience, and construct a dynamic relationship between them, all of which pertain equally to holistic conceptions of culture and context. The analysis of rhetoric must, therefore, incorporate both individual agency and the holism of the social relationship, insofar as it is rhetorically mediated. Seen in this light, rhetoric is a property intrinsic to socially situated communication, but also embedded within it. Therefore, we require a general view that accounts for rhetoric’s full dimensions, but also one which can support its integration with the other modes of social science that pertain to the dynamics of social relationships.

**ii) Rhetoric as an analytical framework for politics**

The previous section already shows how recent research takes on the project of developing the idea of rhetoric as an analytical framework, proposing to extend the utility of the concept beyond speech as an object, to apply to political analysis more generally. Finlayson (2004a, 2007), along with Atkins and Martin, has proposed the idea of Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA), which aims to integrate the many findings on political discourse and communication into the broader research programme of political science ‘concerned with the formation, propagation, development and change of ideas in politics’ (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013, p. 162). RPA is concerned primarily with argumentation, focusing on ‘the arguments found in political speech, and especially the proofs actors bring forward in justifying claims and giving reasons for others to share them’ (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013, p. 162). This approach rejects the instrumental theory of rhetoric. By revealing how the form and performance of argumentation is intrinsic to its content, rhetoric is embedded within an analytical framework, which includes cultural and historical patterns of argumentation. For example, Finlayson (2007) characterizes governance narratives not only as interpretive, but also as rhetorical, insofar as they aim to persuade an audience. Political culture thus produces and is produced by rhetoric, such that RPA contributes to the analysis of political ideas and ideologies.
Martin (2013a) also puts forward a theory of political rhetoric with an emphasis on persuasion. Like Finlayson, he aims to integrate the pragmatic concerns of rhetoric with the construction of underlying principles and power relations. He conceives of rhetoric as mediating between politics and ‘the political’, the abstract ontological principles that legitimate certain actors and ideas. The act of persuasion is thus ‘both a mundane business and a channel of wider power relations; a process of coalition building and an effort to define higher principles’ (2013a). The theoretical originality of this framework draws on the crucial insight that rhetoric is a situated practice of argumentation (2013a, p. 9). As such, it must be linked to the context of a specific time and space, and contributes to this context in return through its technical deployment. Rhetoric is thus a political practice that continuously remakes the world anew, generating both stability and change in meaning. This makes it significantly different from discourse analysis, which operates at a higher level of abstraction (2013a, p. 11). Rhetoric is the pragmatic mechanism through which discourses can be built and through which both stable and fluid meanings are put into play. Rhetoric is not exclusive of other approaches to discourse but it is irreducible to them.

I argue that these works have begun to develop a ‘thick’ theory of rhetoric. From them, one can infer some significant advantages in moving beyond the approach to rhetoric as an object, to using rhetoric as an analytical framework to study political language. Firstly, they show that rhetoric is both significant in its own right, but at the same time it is not autonomous from other political phenomena. This presents the difficulty of how to recognise the unique contribution of rhetoric while at the same time integrating it with the study of other political relations in regard to which it is not exclusive. Such a view contrasts with much of the literature found within rhetoric studies elsewhere, such as the United States, where rhetoric is treated as a distinct discipline studying an autonomous reality. But such a view is unconvincing: rhetoric should be integrated within a general approach to communication, and for our purposes, political science. Secondly, the thick view points to rhetoric as a dynamic, relational theory of communication. All language is addressed to an audience, whether that audience is present, spread across the world, or even across history. And the audience has its own reaction, which is potentially different each time. Theories of language which treat it in isolation from its relational dimension – as though discourse constituted a semi-fixed, structuring episteme rather than a dynamic interaction – are insufficient explanations of the rhetorical dimension. In a rhetorical explanation, the reaction of the audience must always be taken into account.

Furthermore, the interplay between speaker and audience is more than just an intersubjectively-constructed discourse, but something more; it is a social relationship between alternative positions, of which rhetorical discourse is but one aspect. This points to a third aspect of a thick theory of rhetoric, that it is a situated practice in interaction with a context, which is both cultural and temporal. Thus, a relational theory of rhetoric supports a link between situated practices and the formulation of lasting discursive patterns. At the same time, rhetoric may also be a play upon differences without touching the social-structured relations that contextualise it. The participants are free to make explicit these entrenched social differences, or not, and to leave their social differences untouched at the end of a rhetorical exchange. Thus, rhetoric should not be confined to interpretive analyses per se – as the analysis of discourse or narratives as independent realities – but should be incorporated within holist accounts of social dynamics which take in the effects of structuring social forces embedded in society. Because rhetoric permits multiple interpretations and arguments to coexist, it involves interpretation, but because it is integrated with other relational properties it is better conceived within a constructivist social science. At the same time, this thick approach to rhetoric cannot be reduced to the analysis of social structures, because the rhetorical perspective enables us to value its ‘surface’ qualities, which includes its use in manipulation and ‘spin’, as well as to see its role in contributing towards the propagation of deeper, discursive structures. Such a view meets the interpretive stipulation that analysis not reify discourses or sets of ideas (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p. 41), but it also
varies from them by incorporating holist analyses of social relations that structure the possibilities of any particular rhetorical exchange. Finally, the thick theory of rhetoric as situated practice expresses the performative dimension of discourse, because the act of making certain utterances affects the basic speaker-audience relationship as much as the substantive content of the discourse (Finlayson and Martin, 2008).

A thick theory of rhetoric can thus be developed upon these insights. But it must go further than previous interpretive analyses, which accept too many limitations on rhetoric and the rhetorical. The primary limitation of these approaches is that they are too constrained, both conceptually and methodologically. Rhetoric, limited to persuasion, can only be a partial view because it excludes, or at best diminishes, the figurative dimension of language. Rhetorical figures can be used to please an audience and thus persuade it, but they are not only used for this purpose. Ceremonial is highly figurative and does not aim to persuade. This aspect of figurative rhetoric is also important because a theory premised on persuasion presumes that politics always concerns open argumentation about questions, when we know that rhetoric can be used equally to shut argumentation down, or to avoid questioning altogether. Rhetoric can respond to problems by glossing over them, articulating them in such a way as to sate the audience, while leaving answers ambiguous so as to avoid conflict. Rhetoric thus depoliticizes as much as it deliberates. A key property of rhetoric is that it fulfils our desire to see politics as always new, thus supporting the continuation of tradition by making it relevant for the current context. But it can also articulate the new and threatening in terms of the old. Rhetoric is a flexible discourse is used both in sincere deliberation over problems and the manipulative repression of them. A thick theory of rhetoric should account for all its properties and all its uses, beyond the persuasive and the deliberative, so that we can apprehend its effects on power. Next, while rhetorical practice and the scholarly analysis of it clearly concern making interpretations, the interpretive theory of rhetoric is too varied to be useful for social science that aims to produce generalities of any kind. In particular, the postfoundational basis of interpretive theories of rhetoric is not at all well-placed to do this, because it multiplies the possibilities of interpretations and runs against efforts to produce systematic theory. If rhetoric is important but not autonomous from other aspects of political interaction, then the relational properties of rhetoric suggest that it should be grounded in a more generally applicable relational theory that will support methodological compatibility with other subdisciplines of political science, as well as interdisciplinary perspectives, combining with history, sociology and psychology.

2. The theory of rhetoric as the negotiation of distance

The path to a more comprehensive of rhetoric that is also integrated and methodologically compatible with other elements of political science can be pursued through a new theory of rhetoric based in the concept questioning. Rather than thinking of rhetoric as a distinct ontological category, questioning theory conceives of rhetoric as a mechanism for treating questions concerning two or more individuals. The questioning basis of the theory reflects the contingency of social relations, including politics, and it supports the idea of rhetoric and argumentation as pertaining to multiple possible answers. But more than this, it embeds rhetoric within a relational conception that not only applies to linguistically-mediated relations, but is also compatible with the study of other relational entities, such as ideas, interests, and institutions, insofar as they structure social interactions.

The theory is a recent philosophy of rhetoric, put forward by philosopher Michel Meyer. First, it conceives of rhetoric as a logical relationship between questions. Using this logic, Meyer (2008, 2010) proposes three general laws of rhetoric, a very unusual claim in a highly interpretive field marked by a proliferation of theories. The first law is that rhetoric and argumentation can be unified in a theory of reference which relates one question (q) to another, and links their
answers (a): $a_1 \rightarrow q_1, q_2$, or, in longer form; (1) $a_1 \rightarrow q_1, q_2, (2) a_1 = a_2, (3) a_1 \rightarrow a_2$. To put it in more prosaic terms: when a statement is made, it is interpreted by a listener, who conceives of it as an answer ($a_i$) to a question ($q_j$). But when $q_1$ does not hold a clear meaning in the given context, the interpreter then searches for an alternative question ($q_j$) for which can be found the real answer ($a_i$). Thus, rhetoric and argumentation link one question to another. The rhetoric-argumentative dimension can be weighted in one of two ways. The first answer may serve as a reason for accepting a second answer, in which case it is an argumentation. Alternatively, if the meaning of the first answer is not self-contained as a literal answer to a question, the second question and answer are implied by it. The meaning is generated figuratively by a logic of implication from one answer to another, via a related question. Metaphors most obviously work this way: Richard is not literally a lion, but has the virtuous properties of a lion, its courage. The use of the figure generates added impact for the audience, because it has to search for the real answer and is thus actively involved in interpreting the discourse. But in this example, it is equally an argument: Richard’s qualities as a leader gives a reason for others to follow him. Figurative rhetoric works by implication in terms of meaning, but so does argumentation, which is most persuasive when it relies on an implied meaning, allowing the audience to contribute their own ideas, which generates an audience involvement and persuasive effect that Aristotle noted was the essential quality of the logical enthymeme (REF Aristotle). The emphasis upon which of argumentative or figurative rhetoric is more pertinent in any given case depends only upon the context. When questions are more explicit – when they are ‘on the table’ – then discourse becomes more conflictual, a debate between questioners maintaining opposing answers. When the question at stake is more implicit, discourse is more figurative (‘under the table’, the exemplary case being literature) (Meyer, 2008). Thus, rhetoric and argumentation can be incorporated within the one logical relation, i.e., the rhetoric of figures and the rhetoric of conflicts can be combined.

This logic of implication is complemented by a theory of rhetoric in society. Meyer argues that a second general law defines questioning in society: ‘Rhetoric is the negotiation of distance between individuals in regard to a given question’ (2008, p. 21, my translation; see also, Meyer, 2010). The first thing to note is that this definition takes us in quite a different direction from language-based theories that interpret reality as ‘discursive’ because it grounds language within a primary, relational construct, the distance between individuals in society, conceptualized as a question. That distance is certainly operationalized partly through discourse, but distance can include all other kinds of social markers as well. Rhetoric is not ontologically distinct but only one mechanism of negotiating social relations. The key element of the theory is the nature of distance as a question. Rhetoric and communication is just one way for individuals to negotiate their differences, which are equally defined by economic, institutional, and cultural relations. When two (or more) individuals communicate, it is because they have question or problem in mind. But, in a relational theory, beneath the treatment of these specific questions, what is also treated is the question of the distance between individuals. If they reach agreement, they move closer to one another; if they disagree, they move further apart, perhaps even to the point of strong conflict, requiring resort to the law in order to reach an resolution. They may also use figurative means to avoid certain questions in order to maintain sufficient proximity when raising the question would otherwise generate conflict, or they may provoke such questions in order to distance themselves from one another. In other words, this theory locates rhetoric within a general theory of social action as the production and negotiation of social distances. And because social distances are understood as fundamentally problematic, the theory is both individualist – in that for each individual every instance of action or communication is new – and holist, because an intersubjective relationship is at stake. Thus, the view of rhetoric as an autonomous discipline is rejected in favour of locating it within an interdisciplinary framework. Not only does this concern for distance strike a common note with contemporary constructivism (Hay, 2001, Hay, 2008) and the strategic-relational approach (Jessop, 2008), it also shares a common basis.

Take the example of British Chancellor George Osborne’s comments on welfare reform in recent years. In the context of justifying an austerity budget, the Chancellor made the widely reported comment concerning welfare reform, that ‘fairness is also about being fair to the person who leaves home every morning to go out to work and sees that their neighbour is still asleep, living a life on benefits. As well as a tax system where the richest pay their fair share, we have to have a welfare system that is fair to the working people who pay for it’ (Osborne, 2012a). This rhetoric evokes an image in the mind of the audience, aiming to appeal generate an emotional reaction (pathos) by identifying with the worker (Hayton and McEnhill, 2014). Equally, Hayton and McEnhill point out that it also makes a moral argument (ethos), about fairness, and a logical argument (logos) about the need for cutting back on expenditure. A rhetorical analysis thus provides a comprehensive analysis of the language for its values, reasoning, and emotional content. However, this is only one aspect of the relationship at stake. The policy connected with this rhetoric is not really greatly different from previous social policy regarding the unemployed (REF?). Examining the policy itself, there is little difference, so the rhetoric appears trivial, but a decoration of the substantive definition of the political difference between worker and unemployed. However, what is new is the distance evoked by the rhetoric. The rhetoric presents a clear distance between the worker leaving home and welfare recipient indoors, asleep, which is all the marked because it is evoked through an image that literally describes a spatial and temporal distance between the two individuals. The distance that separates them is of an ethos to a pathos, the one confident in the virtue of work while also experiencing resentment at the neighbour. In raising this distance, the speaker also intends to reduce the distance between his party and the audience members who experience the emotion, while increasing the distance between voters and Labour, implicitly constructed as the protector of the lazy welfare recipient.

In such statements, there is a difference at work, but this difference cannot be adequately described as simply that between the subject and an ‘other’. The use of imagery and the appeal to pathos shows how the strength of feeling can vary and be played upon to attenuate the difference, as distance. That is, when conceived as a question with multiple solutions, rhetorical negotiation can resolve upon a continuum of relative social positions. In the example above, an audience may find itself much closer, emotionally charged by the Chancellor’s characterisation of the worker versus the unemployed, or perhaps only somewhat closer, feeling that the image invoked is too harsh, or perhaps offended by the comparison itself, and thus producing feelings of anger that put one at a greater distance. The significance of rhetoric can also be found in the rhetorical evocation of the distance because it is presented anew each time, even when the policy measures may not have greatly changed, as in the welfare example above. Even though we know many social policies have changed little between Labour and Coalition governments, the emotional element represents the government’s approach as original, and as comparably tougher than that of the previous government. Rhetoric is the means by which people encounter politics as forever new, and therefore the imagery used has a more substantial impact by reflecting and also generating a psychological and social distance between citizens, as well as between state and society. The policy may not be entirely new, but the presentation is, and hence the solution to the question of political distances is also new. That is, the rhetoric may trivial but it does not have trivial effects: it impacts upon the political distance between individuals and between state and society, hence it contributes vitally to political contestation and to social structuration.

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2 On an earlier occasion, this worker was said to be a ‘shift worker’ Osborne, G. (2012b) Speech to the Conservative Party Conference: Full text. New Statesman..
The third general law of rhetoric follows from the second, characterising distance using rhetorical concepts by articulating the performative dimension of rhetorical practice: the distance between individuals in regard to a question (logos) is the distance between ethos and pathos. That is, a speaker (ethos) treats his/her distance from an interlocutor (pathos) as a question (logos). This situates rhetorical theory within the social situation itself. This does two interesting things from a theoretical perspective. Firstly, it equalizes Aristotle’s three concepts – that he defined as the available means of persuasion – within each instance of communication, rather than emphasizing one or the other, depending on the circumstances. It is thus a comprehensive theory that integrates the values, reasons, and emotions of rhetoric. In promoting the government's welfare policy, the Chancellor is not only articulating an idea as a series of reasons (logos), he also presents a particular ethos and seeks a reaction from the audience (pathos). Ultimately, he aims to reduce the distance between his government and the voters on the welfare question. Secondly, this theory uses rhetorical concepts in a new way that brings forth the performative dimension of making speech acts, and explains it for its relational effects. In a dialogue, speakers become ethos and pathos in turns, negotiating the distance between themselves through their appeals and reactions. This links rhetoric with the immediate question with a deeper affirmation of institutions, which are discursively performed. In speaking to the parliament, George Osborne performs his role as Chancellor, not only making an argument for his government’s welfare policy but also confirming that he is authorised by the office to do so, which authorises it in return, affirming the institution itself as the legitimate site of decision making. By contrast, a poorly performing minister, one who makes public gaffes and is weak answering questions in parliament, risks compromising the standing of the office, or even the government, itself. In terms of political strategy, the Chancellor negotiates the distance between the government and the opposition on questions of social security policy, and with the public, who judge his character (ethos) through their own emotional reactions, and find themselves closer, further, or the same distance in regard to him. This has deeper effects in producing normative ideas about welfare. To return to the example, the unemployed, the object of discourse but not the primary audience, are the most reduced by this rhetoric, and thereby the furthest from legitimate social norms. Here, rhetoric is more than just a framework for analysing discourse, but a theory of how rhetoric performs political distanciation and how this also has deeper, structural effects. It also shows how rhetorical strategy operates. Furthermore, it suggests methodologically compatibility between rhetorical strategizing and the quantifiable measures of distance found in political sociology, given that political rhetoric in democracies primarily pertains to party competition.

The questioning theory of rhetoric supports the claims of rhetoric as an analytical framework but also enhances and extends it. This is not necessarily opposed to other theories of rhetoric, but is more compatible than other approaches with other political science methods. Distance provides the common basis for integrating rhetoric with existing approaches. Importantly, in providing a rhetorical theory of performativity, it both extends the territory of rhetoric to communication in general while also subsuming it within a theory of social relations, and thus rejects the idea that rhetoric is an autonomous discipline. Rhetoric must be analysed with regard to other modalities of social life that structure social distance, including the economy, law, political institutions and culture.

3. Applications of the framework to understanding governance

This theory of rhetoric articulates a logic that supports the integration of the rhetorico-argumentative properties with other questions in political analysis. The theoretical move for effecting this relates to the problematological (not ontological) conception of social action: the primary basis for social relations is the relationship between two questioners, and the distance
between them, conceived as a question. They then treat that question of distance through substantive questions. Hence, distance is the basic question of social relations, how human beings can live together. The means by which they treat questions, therefore, is secondary to the primary question of distance. Firstly, this conception of socio-political relations allows us to think of governance narratives differently. As Finlayson has noted (above), governance narratives perform a rhetorical function in that they are argumentative, presenting reasons for decisions and acting as justifications. The questioning approach does not posit narratives only as epistemes governing the beliefs of individuals, but rather situates them in the space between individuals. Narratives are shared stories, and thus certainly do influence ideas and beliefs about the world, but they are not the sole basis of epistemological understanding. Political actors can subscribe to shared stories, partly for strategic reasons, without necessarily ‘believing’ in them. Narratives may even be ‘rhetorical’ in the pejorative sense of a concocted story to cover one’s tracks. One purpose of narratives is thus a way to reduce the distance between the many parties to a decision: ‘we’ are united because we share a narrative of collective action and identification, which creates a political and cultural bond between us. Political solidarity is the issue as much as the response to a policy problem. Narratives also serve to define and justify the distance between decision makers and citizens concerning decisions taken. Citizens need to accept the narrative so – following Aristotle’s insight that the more the audience is involved in an argumentation, they more likely they are to accept it (the logic of the enthymeme; REF Aristotle) – stories are created with regard to the prevailing justifications acceptable to the public, and which implicate citizens in the public sphere narrative surrounding the decision. At the societal level, narratives take the form of national histories which unite an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983) in a shared identity (pathos), which can then be used routinely as an argument to justify decisions taken ‘in the national interest’.

The problematological approach moves away from an ontological view which situates individuals within narratives as a form of overarching episteme that governs ideas. By theoretically re-situating narratives as lying between individuals, as a manner of negotiating the distance between them, the problematological approach decentres narratives. This is a theoretical shift, not a methodological one. I subscribe strongly to the view that narrative construction is a key device in social life, including in governance practice (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006). However, the questioning approach removes the idealist overtones of narrative analysis by locating them within a constructivist theory in which the basic unit is political distance, not ‘ideas’, which are secondary. Narratives do serve an interpretive purpose, helping to frame, and respond to, reality through stories, but they also treat a socio-political question, negotiating the distance between individuals. Narratives can be highly figurative when allowed to pass under the table, without being questioned, and more explicitly argumentative when rival narratives are brought into conflict, and opposed sides must argue for their preferred stories.

Secondly, this framework is also able to re-situate institutions within a constructivist account. Similarly to the question of narratives, this approach locates institutions as phenomena that mediate the distance between individuals. In some institutionalisms, individual political actors are conceived of as ontologically contained within institutions, so that their actions are determined by institutional rules in a mechanical manner. However, in practice, we know that even bureaucrats have freedom to decide whether to invoke a rule or not, and that the formal accounts of decisions in terms of correct procedure are just that – accounts – rather than a record of the decision-making process (REF Colebatch; Hoppe?). Institutions matter, because through their rules and the interests of their officers whose interests are linked with institutional power, they effect a strong structuring force on the relationship between their officers and other actors. But institutional practices are all also effected by individual questioners who take institutional rules, practices and culture into account when mediating the distance between themselves and others. That is, institutions are decentred, situated between a speaker and
Thus, while the viability of institutions can be questioned at any time through mechanisms for treating them, and are capable of mediating the distance between rival claimants. This contributes to the path-dependency of institutions, which attain the status of accepted ‘partial answers’ to political questions, answers which frame problems, provide practical mechanisms for treating them, and are capable of mediating the distance between rival claimants. Thus, while the viability of institutions can be questioned at any time through a cost-benefit
calculation, in practice they tend not to be because such questioning is repressed at least partly through the cultural acceptance (pathos) of longstanding institutions as problem-treating mechanisms. This idea puts forward that legitimacy accrues at the macro-level only from micro-level actions. It does not effect a reification of the state, because the reality of the state is constructed from, and repeatedly asserted by, individual actions. I suppose one might call this ‘Rhetorical Institutionalism’, given that it aims to explain how institutions are constructed and legitimated through a theory of discourse that is argumentative and rhetorical. However, the desirability of yet another institutionalism is questionable, such that the label could itself become rhetorical, in the most pejorative sense, and thus undermine its own legitimacy. In any case, I have argued that rhetoric is not an autonomous field or analytical framework, but rather integrated with other questions. The unifying concept here is not rhetoric but questioning and distance. Instead, I prefer to move towards an integrated perspective, based on these concepts. At the same time, the rhetorical perspective adds something new that discourse institutionalism lacks; a strong emphasis on the language as experienced with immediacy by situated actors, such that ‘discourses’ are made by individual communicative exchanges that, even where recognizable as autonomous sets of linguistic terms and concepts, form only a contextual basis, not a determinative structure, for communications between speakers and their audiences. It also adds something that the interpretive perspective lacks; the inclusion of institutions as important structuring features of politics and which do attain a kind of autonomous reality, however much they might be questioned in theory. This version of constructivist institutionalism re-emphasizes institutions, without ‘re-centering’ them.

4. Conclusion

Rhetoric is an important object for political analysis but it can also be part of an analytical framework to conceptualize the operation of political power in society. However, to overcome its pejorative heritage, a useable and respectable approach should be grounded in a foundationalist philosophy and integrated with a general theory of communication. At the same time, rhetoric is not an autonomous discipline: it must be integrated with other social sciences. In political science, the logic of rhetorical and argumentative implication conceived in a theory of questioning, along with the relational theory of distance, is able to integrate rhetoric with other sub-disciplinary approaches and research questions. By containing rhetoric within a relational conception of society, in which distance is the primary question, we can avoid excessive over-interpretations of discourse and use rhetoric to compliment the analysis of the central questions of the discipline. The framework based in questioning and distance does not dispense with well-known modes of analysing rhetoric, but it does provide a parsimonious and eloquent definition that supports a deeper and more comprehensive engagement with political rhetoric and the rhetorical. This includes contributing to governance theory by originating a new analytical framework for thinking through narratives and institutions, aiming to accord a stronger role for institutions in the constructivist and interpretive perspectives. The fundamental relational property of rhetoric provides the basis for this new form of conceptual analysis.

Rhetoric deals with the problematic and is thus essential to politics because the future is always unknown. Even when we have clear ideas about what to do, enacting them in practice introduces further unknowns. Rhetoric and argumentation help us reach decisions and justify them, but also mediate the political differences between members of the polity by negotiating their variable distances from one another in regard to specific questions. Rhetoric is a vehicle for political contestation, one which can be rational but also concerns competing values and is inflected with strong emotions. Argumentation is not only a technical means for debating questions but what mediates the distance between individuals surrounding those questions. Therefore rhetoric is a tool of social structuration. At the same time, political power is also
rhetorical because the legitimacy of institutions is put out of the question by rendering it implicit. Indeed, equally, political language uses rhetorical devices to avoid problems, to repress questioning that might lead to conflict and drive members of society apart into conflict. While some advocates of deliberative democracy believe a normative discourse can be developed that explicates all questions, wise leaders, and many citizens, understand that maintaining order and repressing conflict are just as important as confronting challenging political questions.

Therefore, the definition of rhetoric should not be limited to persuasion. On many occasions, people make little effort to persuade, instead using the guise of argumentation to boldly state their views and indicate their distance from opponents. Public sphere debates so often lack the quality of calm rational discourse that it a theory based on this premise has limited empirical relevance. Instead, it is rhetoric – with all its emotions and manipulations – through which we negotiate our differences. People do change their minds during public debate, but very often they do not. In democracies, one must make the effort to persuade, because all citizens are equal and have the right to make their own choices. But that does not mean everyone is willing to change their mind on the basis of the better argument. Entrenched differences often remain and become even stronger after discussion. Take the example of empirical social network analysis of Palestinians and Israelis in the summer conflict of 2014. Researchers found that the dominant pattern of tweets was to affirm their connection with views they supported and to denounce the opposing side (REF). The internet may produce a greater volume of communications without any more persuasion, but rather deeper distanciation. Rhetoric is a way for people to maintain political differentiation, to avoid changing their minds, and instead to find reasons to justify their distance from others. And in this respect, rhetoric is only one mode of negotiating social distance, which is set more concretely by the economy, by law and institutions, and culture. Therefore the study of political rhetoric must be integrated with an analysis of these other modalities of differentiation. The theory of distance provides a conceptual common ground on which to do so.
References


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