

Rhetorical Theory and Public Relations: From the Agora to the Postmodern

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Abstract

The employment of notions from rhetorical theory has become a trend in the analysis and teaching of public relations. This paper sets out to inform this trend by charting the long history of the rhetorical tradition. This history started with the sophistry of the ancient Athenian agora. Next came the Latinate incorporation of rhetoric into the trivium (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic or logic) - the three discursive subjects of classical liberal education. With the emergence of modernism rhetoric was eclipsed by emphasis on empirical and positivistic routes to achieving reason and understanding. But in the postmodern era it is hard to defend any data from the charge that it can only be understood through discursive processes. This paper suggests public relations scholars need to pay attention to this history in order to adapt rhetorical theory to public relations.

Keywords: Rhetoric, public relations, discourse, theory

Introduction – Resort to Rhetorical Theory

The notions 'rhetoric', 'rhetorician' and 'rhetor' are sometimes applied in academic and practical writings on the activities of public relations. Examples are found in: (Pullman, 2005); (Brown, 2004); (Toth, 1999); (Toth & Heath, 1992: xi-xii); (Heath Robert, 2000:50); (Marsh, 2003:352); (Ihlen, 2002:259); (Heath, 1993:141); (Elwood, 1995:9); (Skerlep, 2001:176); (Metzler, 2000:321-324); (Heath, 2000:510); (Leichty, 2003:277); (G. Cheyney & Dionisopoulos, 1989:165); (G. Cheyney & Christensen, 2000:172); (Millar & Heath, 2003:6); (Vazquez, 1993:206); (Thompson, 1998); (Stockwell, 2005).

The above writers enlist concepts from this more-than-two millennia tradition of influential communication in many ways. They enlist these notions from the perspective of:

- A common sense that the activity of public relations has much to do with the notion of persuasion.
- A rhetorical contest – the idea that contemporary democracy is hammered out verbally or by other communication exchange in a give and take symmetrical manner rather like democracy was said to be managed and maintained through the processes of the ancient Greek agora.
- The use of Kenneth Burke's symbolic notions of humankind as signifying animals.
- In relation to Toulmin's notions of claim, ground, warrant and backing in argumentation.
- The notion of apologia when corporations explain controversial actions.
- The notion of topoi or loci – the concepts which are offered to publics in explanations.
- Metaphysical arguments relating to how public relations discourse may create or influence publics' notions of reality.

These usages involve manifestations of the purposive use of persuasive discourse and the theorisation of how the world is signified by language. The usages span, what could be termed, the four ages of rhetoric. The first age was the age of the sophists when governance through verbal appeal to reason in public debate was pioneered in ancient Athens. The second age was the

Latin to pre-Enlightenment phase when rhetoric was systematised as a professional tool for the governing of empires and organised religion. In the third age rhetoric went 'underground' as the scientists of the modern era privileged empiricism and positivism over discursive approaches to reason. We are now in the fourth, the postmodern era of rhetoric where thought is often explained as based on symbolic systems and positivistic notions are closely critiqued. Postmodernism spawned a 'New Rhetoric' movement in the mid 20th century which would seem to have merged into contemporary cultural theory movements which claim understandings are always conveyed and grasped discursively.

The consequences of this conceptual history and the need for an understanding of this conceptual history are important for public relations in a number of ways. First it is important to grasp why the term 'rhetoric' currently has such a bad name. It has a bad name principally because of the turn to empiricism and positivism which underlies modernism and which still governs much of contemporary thinking. As we will see 'rhetoric' was despised and eschewed by that turn. Secondly, the consequence of this tainting is that there is a certain coyness among practitioners and academics in the field of public relations to acknowledge the centrality to cultural formation which the use of purposive persuasive discourse involves. Blatantly unethical use of public relations, of the same type as the activities condemned by Plato when sophists acted dishonestly, is but a thin sensationalist veneer over a far deeper reason why the importance of public relations activity is never fully revealed. This paper is aimed at digging deeper in order to confirm rhetoric's importance to public relations and consequently to the more substantial way in which public relations activity and public relations scholarship should be regarded.

A Short History of Rhetoric

Terms relating to rhetoric have a long history. Since Plato the term 'rhetor' – stemming from its ancient Greek roots (ρήτωρ = rhetoric) has meant the persuasive speech giver. 'Rhetorician' has meant the teacher of oral and, later written persuasive practices. Persuasive speeches were a cornerstone of ancient Greek society and persuasive speaking and writing has been fundamental to all social systems since. Rhetoric in legal and political forums involves influencing thinking and thus decision making by appeals to reason as well as emotion. The character of the speaker or issuing authority is also important if such appeals are to avoid cynicism in the audience. Teachers of this practice were initially called sophists. Sophistic practice involved more than clever argumentation. To some analysts sophists created the first 'Enlightenment' in that before the common era (BCE) they deconstructed religion and other irrationality by examining and experimenting with 'discourse', that is the way language constructs notions of the world and of truth (Jarratt, 1991:xviii); (Welch, 1999:6 - 7); (Welch, 1990:5) (Hauser, 1999:13). In classical times rhetoric was analysed and its aspects were classified and developed most notably by Isocrates (436 - 338 BCE) and Aristotle (384 - 322 BCE). Plato (427 - 347 BCE) was highly critical of sophistic excesses where emotion or lying dominated appeals to reason or cloaked the questionable character or dubious intentions of the rhetor (Plato, 1973). Persuasive speaking and writing and their teaching were taken over and developed by the Romans, notably Cicero (106 - 43 BCE) and Quintilian (35 – 95 CE). After the intervention of Professor of Rhetoric St Augustine of Hippo (354 - 430 CE) and Cassiodorus (480 – 573 CE) rhetoric was designated one

of the 'trivium' of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic among the 'seven liberal arts' which also included arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy. The 'trivia' – note the Post-enlightenment fate of this term – were the 'discourse based sciences'. The other four were the less or non-discursive sciences (Deely, 2001:183 - 184). In one form or another rhetorical practice and its teaching became a plank of the governance of society and its institutions by clerical and secular administrations and the professions in western society from Roman times up to the nineteenth century (Ong, 2002); (Ward, 1995); (Vickers, 1988); (Murphy, 1974); (Howell, 1961). For John O Ward:

The classical art of rhetoric served the Middle Ages more or less as the arts or sciences of advertising, journalism, political debate, 'communications', prose and business composition, public and personal relations and even computer programming serve modern society. It provided guides and tips for the appropriate use of humour, on increasing memory capacity, on analysing legal issues, on acting and gesture, for oral and written style, conversation, letter-writing, or speech-making. With a little adjustment, it was made to fit every kind of situation requiring or benefiting from persuasive or effective communication. (Ward, 1995:10)

At the end of the middle ages however the rhetorical tradition was severely curtailed to a large extent by the thinking of Peter Ramus (1515 – 1572) and Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650) (Howell, 1961); (Ong, 2004); (Deely, 2001); (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001:675 - 681). In the ensuing Enlightenment period logic and reasoning or 'dialectic' was separated from rhetoric. Rhetoric became a more confined discipline to do with style and eloquence – how to speak and write well. This development led thinking away from Aristotle's advice that: "Rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic" (Aristotle & Ross, 1952:593); (Aristotle & Lawson-Tancred, 1991:66). Aristotle suggested that persuasive communication and reasoning are closely bound together: "...all men engage in them both [dialectic or reasoning and rhetoric or persuasion]...for all men attempt in some measure both to conduct investigations and to furnish explanations, both to defend and to prosecute." (Aristotle & Lawson-Tancred, 1991:66). The post-Ramus and post-Cartesian division of rhetoric from logical reasoning also cut across the views of the Stoics, particularly Zeno of Citium (333 - 264 BCE):

[Hitherto] Over and over again in logical and rhetorical treatises of the English Renaissance, logic is compared to the closed fist and rhetoric to the open hand, this metaphor being borrowed from Zeno through Cicero and Quintilian to explain the preoccupation of logic with the tight discourses of the philosopher and the preoccupation of rhetoric with the more open discourses of orator and populariser. (Howell, 1961:4)

Also see (Zimmerman, 2000:113); (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001:738) and Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626). Bacon is extracted in Bizzell and Herzberg as follows:

It appeareth that logic differeth from rhetoric, not only as the fist from the palm, the one close the other at large; but much more than this, that logic handleth reason exact and in truth and rhetoric handleth it as it is planted in popular opinions and manners. And therefore Aristotle doth wisely place rhetoric as between logic on the one side and moral or civil knowledge on the other, as participating in both for the proofs and demonstrations of logic are towards all men indifferent and the same; but the proofs and persuasions of rhetoric ought to differ according to the auditors. (Bacon, 2001:744)

Translations of what Zeno and the Stoics meant by the open hand metaphor differ. But the way the metaphor was taken up before the post-Renaissance decline of rhetoric was that 'dialectic'— that is reasoning among a community of experts, was the 'closed hand'. Rhetoric – involved reasoning with less expert, wider audiences. This was the 'open hand'. This meant that rhetoric and dialectic were thought of as similar processes appropriate to different audiences. The difference was the specialism or the populism of the kinds of reasoning involved. However Ramus and Descartes were able to break this link at the start of a process which has resulted in the various bad connotations which the term 'rhetoric' currently has. Ramus and Descartes' philosophies divided logic from communication during a revolution in social and scientific thinking which cast out the convoluted, complex prognostications of the 'Schoolmen' or 'Scholastics'. These were the traditional, usually religiously based academics, for whom an ossified version of explanation, which involved rhetoric, was fundamental. These professional thinkers were working in a two-thousand-year-old intellectual tradition based principally on Aristotle, which wound its way through Augustine; Thomas Aquinas, (1225 - 1274); and dozens of other major thinkers and theologians. The scholastics were increasingly seen as ponderous and stultifying as they produced reams of obscure reasoning to link their archaic, theological scholarship to the demands of the contemporary developments in society and science. This academic difficulty was one of the major factors in the emergence of the bad connotation of rhetoric as meaningless expression. The fate of rhetoric at this time seems to have been principally a case of collateral damage during the ousting of an intellectual system which was past its use by date:

The triumph of scientific discovery, with which, as a rule, the representatives of Scholasticism in the seats of academic authority had, unfortunately, too little sympathy, led to new ways of philosophising, and when, finally, Descartes in practice, if not in theory, effected a complete separation of philosophy from theology, the modern era had begun and the age known as that of Scholasticism had come to an end. (Catholic-Encyclopedia, 2006)

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) refers mockingly to these "schoolmen" in *Leviathan* Part 2 Chapters VIII:

There is yet another fault in the discourse of some men which may also be numbered amongst the sorts of madness; namely that abuse of words whereby I have spoken before...by the name of absurdity...And this is incident to none but those that converse in questions of matters incomprehensible as the schoolmen...(Hutchins, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., & University of Chicago., 1952:71)

However after expressing himself in earlier works in terms of *scientia civilis*, or civil science (political science) according to Skinner's analysis Hobbes reverts to a rhetorical, more persuasive style of writing for his major work *Leviathan*. This is because Hobbes realised logical reasoning alone is not sufficient to hold and motivate his audience – that is to get his broader audience to 'reason' in the manner he desires (Skinner, 1996). Hobbes wrote about rhetoric and sophistry in a way which depicts rhetoric as an instrument and which demarks sophistry from logic. His definition of rhetoric starts:

Rhetoric is that faculty by which we understand what will serve our turn concerning any subject to win belief in the hearer. Of those things that beget belief some require not the help of art as witnesses, evidences,

and the like, which we invent not, but make use of; and some require art that are invented of us. (Hobbes & Molesworth, 1994:Vol 6)

Sophistry is the feigned art of elench, or coloured reasons. A coloured reason, or elench, is a show of reason to deceive withal. It is either when the deceit lieth in the words; or in the default of logic, called a sophism. (Hobbes & Molesworth, 1994:Vol 6)

The survival of a modernised, post-scholastic undercurrent of rhetoric might also be deduced if we consider the contribution of Giambattista Vico (1668 - 1744) who was a professor of rhetoric (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001:862). Vico is today often pointed to as a founder of the culturalist tradition which, in broad terms, argues human thinking is constructed by the historical social milieu, including language, rather than the other way round. Vico criticised the rush towards scientism:

In our day...philosophical criticism alone is honoured. The art of “topics” [a central element of rhetorical analysis and construction] far from being given first place in the curriculum is utterly disregarded. Again I say this is harmful since the invention of arguments is by nature prior to the judgement of their validity. (Vico, 2001:869)

The importance and longevity of Vico’s work is another clue that rhetorical approaches contemporary to the Enlightenment were not all scholastic muddle and inconsequence. But despite this surviving undercurrent the more usual post-Enlightenment notion of rhetoric was as a narrow school subject about ‘how to communicate eloquently and effectively’:

Rhetoric is an art of speaking finely. It hath two parts: 1. Garnishing of speech called elocution; 2. Garnishing of the manner of utterance, called pronunciation. (Hobbes op. cit.)

Rhetorical studies became predominantly about teaching school boys (not girls) how to speak and write well in an agonistic (argumentative) manner so that they would prosper in their vocations and professions and in politics (Ong, 1982:108 - 112). However in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the rise of evidence-based positivist science (as opposed to discourse-based reasoning) the subject of rhetoric went out of fashion altogether. Post-Newton, nature was more and more being understood as like a machine. The rush was on to construct a ‘science’ of humankind – a ‘social science’ of whom notable exponents were – Auguste Comte (1798-1857); Herbert Spencer (1820-1903); Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). But this could not stop the nagging intellectual suspicion that deliberately organised and directed communication has some importance to reasoning. Discourse-like studies in rhetoric continued through such figures as George Campbell (1719 - 1796); Hugh Blair (1718 – 1800); and Richard Whately (1787 – 1863). This scholarship was later drawn on by such figures as I. A. Richards (1919-1973) and Richard M. Weaver (1910 – 1963). Then in mid 20th century this undercurrent surfaced as the “New Rhetoric” movement in the works of Kenneth Burke (1897 - 1993); Chaim Perleman (1912-1984) with L. Olbrechts-Tyteca (1899 – 1988); and Stephen Toulmin (1922-). Despite this mid 20th century intervention, at the beginning of the 21st century the term ‘rhetoric’ is usually used in common parlance to mean ‘hollow words’ or ‘lip service’ – statements which do not have any substance. In more intellectual discourse ‘rhetoric’ is sometimes used as a more polite alternative to the term propaganda. It is used to signify arguments that in the view of the critic bend reason to try to have the audience accept or acquiesce to a questionable ideology. For the bulk of people it has long been forgotten that in Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian and many

other renditions – not to mention those of the more recent scholars – ‘rhetoric’ was linked to a scheme of civic ethics. It was linked to sets of values and moral codes, either religious or secular, which were intended to help societies reason and function in certain ways. This link was deemed essential because, as this tradition implies, there can be no independence, there can be no neutrality, there can be no freedom from bias in how a society operates vis-à-vis its ways of expressing itself. Modes of expression and ways of thinking are inseparable. It makes no sense to suggest there is a separate, unblemished, pure rationality that can be conceived outside the languages and other symbolic modes of expression which are used to conceive and describe it. This was understood by the ancients and half consciously remembered in the rhetorical tradition. Thus schemes of rhetoric were usually drafted to give society’s members certain moral understandings and values. As a consequence what we might call the tools of rhetoric such as *inventio*, *topoi*, *dispositio*, etc. (discursive imagination; lines of argument; arrangement of arguments, etc) were meant to equip individuals and communities with methods, schema, thinking references and so on in ways which helped societies to achieve those understandings and values...

One of the reasons for the popularity of Cicero and Quintilian’s rhetoric with Renaissance schoolmasters, most of whom were ordained priests, was that these Roman rhetoricians placed so much emphasis on the moral formation of the aspiring pupil. They subscribed to the definition of the ideal orator as being a *good* man skilled in speaking. (Corbett, 1969)

Scholars of rhetoric show that since classical times, in the hands of respected rhetoricians, rhetoric was intended to be about popular reasoning *per se*. It was to do with the whole reasoning and motivational project within the contemporary morality to understand, develop and direct the various forms of society. It operated in terms of discourse formation at the level of personal cosmology which invoked communal understandings. In other words if people tended to think in certain ways – to conceive their world in certain ways - a corresponding certain sort of society would tend to emerge. The comparison with public relations is that...if public relations tends to encourage people to think in certain ways, e.g. that dominant corporations and the current world order is OK, or is not so bad, or its errors can be excused, and so on, then people understanding the world in this way (holding this cosmology) perpetuate the corresponding sort of society through their economic and political behaviour.

It is important to realise that, like public relations, rhetorical processes were not just a one-sided, asymmetrical instrument aimed at the perversion of a pre-assumed ‘rightness’. This is how many western intellectuals currently seem to understand the notion ‘rhetoric’. However, with postmodernism and the ‘linguistic turn’ an accommodation with the historical notion of ‘rhetoric’ is being forged. By the ‘linguistic turn’ we mean the acceptance by many authorities that thought and understandings come about in a process involving discourse – i.e. thought structured by its reliance on language and other symbolic systems by humans who of necessity have to cooperate, and thus think together in unified ways. The ‘linguistic turn’ fits into postmodernism because postmodernism is an era of questioning many Enlightenment conceptions – the scientific and social understandings which were developed in the post-Ramus era. Just as the first sophists foregrounded discourse – that is the ways words are used, to question attitudes and thinking, so recent

analysts and philosophers of language have challenged how modern understandings are created and maintained via discourse. This postmodern 'questioning' has gone under the heading of cultural theory and critical studies in European universities (Hauser, 1999:13). In the US however the same questioning can be seen in the resurgences of rhetorical and critical studies. The term 'rhetoric' has seemingly been more tenacious in the new world. Consequently major twenty-first century studies originating in the US as studies of 'rhetoric' range the above classical authorities on rhetoric in the same academic field as philosophers and theorists more acceptable to 21st century intellectuals and scholars of reason and ethics as analysts of how understandings and reason are formed through discourse. These are philosophers and theorists of culture which include, *inter alia*: Bakhtin, Bathes, Derrida, de Man, Foucault, Lyotard, Nietzsche, Habermas (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001); (Moran & Ballif, 2000); (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2002). It is not clear that these latter philosophers and theorists, or their scholars and followers would relish the title 'rhetorician'. However current editors of compilations on rhetoric, such as the above (Bizzell etc.) are insistent that these more recent scholars are part and parcel of the same tradition – the study of the creation, use and effects of communication which stretched back to the sophists and which for millennia has gone under the heading: 'rhetoric'.

Conclusion – The Despised Acquitted

Public relations analysts and teachers are using rhetorical methods and rhetorical theory to explain public relations concepts and activities. Because of this it is important to understand the complexities of this two and a half millennia old discipline. The implication of the above history is this: Public relations is persuasive communication. Rhetoric is persuasive communication. Persuasive communication is a central pillar of civilisation. In three of the four eras explained above it was widely accepted that persuasive communication is a central pillar of civilisation. In the fourth era – the present time – there is still a rearguard action emanating from the third era. This rearguard disputes that persuasive communication is a pillar of civilisation and a pillar of all the understandings of reality which we have. This rearguard is one of the principle reasons why both the concept 'rhetoric' and the concept 'public relations' are extensively despised or used as terms of insult. The cognoscenti of the public relations industry and the public relations academic industry tend to avoid direct confrontation with this criticism. But acquiescence in this pariah status is self defeating. It is self defeating because the transgressions of public relations practitioners, which in reality are very much in the minority, are none-the-less taken as the norm by many people. An historical understanding could be used to end this pillorying. And if it were, a revolution would ensue. Proper understanding of the rhetorical tradition – and its heir – public relations would lead to a revolution in conceptions of how society is developed and maintained. This in turn would lead to a transformation of the way public relations is researched, taught and practiced.

Online Glossary of Terms Referred to Above

(If the addresses have shifted, please Google the term +Wikipedia)

(*apologia*, *topoi loci communes enthymeme*, *enthymeme2*, *warrant*, *warrant2*, *rhetoric*, *rhetoric2*, *dialectic*, *dislectic2* *discourse*, *postmodernism*, *linguistic turn episteme*, *lifeworld*)

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