

Rhetoric and Politics

K20.1559/Fall 2009

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Office hours:

Monday 2-6

Tuesday 2-5

Thursday by appt

The central question in this course is how to theorize language and conceive its place in political life. Since Plato, philosophy has defined itself against "rhetoric," as if to juxtapose a pure form of rational speech devoted only to truth, and in contrast, manipulative speech devoted to self-serving persuasion, even domination. Similarly, many theorists of media studies argue that in politics there is only "propaganda," and depict a political world ruled by monolithic "media," though they disagree how to respond. Some seek alternatives to propaganda/rhetoric in scientific expertise, in rational validation of claims, or in dreams of post-partisan dialogue, others endorse "counter-propaganda" on behalf of democratic goals. But perhaps the dichotomy between pure and impure speech is mistaken: is there an inescapably rhetorical element in all speech, even speech that denounces "rhetoric?" Might rhetoric -the artful use of words to persuade an audience- in fact be essential to any genuine truth-telling, great literary art, and authentic political speech?

Required TextsPlato, *The Gorgias*Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and The Poetics*Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*George Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By*Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince and The Discourses*Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*Herman Melville, *Short Novels*Hannah Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice*

xeroxed packet (provided by instructor)

Course Requirements

Attendance is mandatory

one-page response papers each week

a five-page critical essay

one rhetorical analysis

it is necessary to say that if any student commits an act of plagiarism at any point during the semester, they will receive an F for the course

Schedule of Classes

9/10

#1 **introduction**

9/17

#2 **Creating “Rhetoric” and “Philosophy”**

read:

- *Plato, Gorgias (entire)
- *Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, “the Melian Debate”
- *Peter Euben, “Democracy and Political Theory” (=25 pages)
- *Stanley Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts (excerpt =30 pages)

- write:** (a) Assess how Plato distinguishes “rhetoric” and “philosophy.”
(b) Is his distinction credible? “rhetorical” in his sense?
(c) Is his distinction still powerful in our culture?
(d) How does his dialogue relate to politics now?
(e) Analyze Fish’s distinction between “dialectical” and “rhetorical,” or, his theory of reading.
(f) Address Euben’s claim that Plato cannot -and knows he cannot- escape rhetoric.

9/24

#3 **Redeeming Rhetoric: Rhetoric and Politics**

read:

- *Aristotle, The Politics (excerpt/xerox)
- *Aristotle, The Rhetoric:
Book I(1-9); Book II(1-10/18-25); Book III(1-7) (=120 pages)
- *Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives:
intro, 3-13, 16-23, 40-78, 267-79 (or read to 294) (=65 pages)

- write:** (a) How does Aristotle redeem rhetoric (or does he defend what Plato calls sophistry)?
(b) Is rhetoric essential in politics because politics is essentially corrupt, or does the bond of politics and rhetoric teach us something else?

10/1

#4 **Rhetoric, Politics, and Race I**

read:

- *Danielle Allen, Talking to Strangers
prologue, chaps 1, 3-4, 5, 9-10 (=95 pages)
- *Barack Obama and Al Sharpton, speeches at the DNC 2004

- write:** (a) How does Allen relate rhetoric and politics? Why is race important for thinking about rhetoric and politics?

first paper due Monday 10/5: Use Aristotle to assess the rhetorical (and therefore political) differences between the speeches by Obama and Sharpton, and consider how these speeches bear on Allen’s argument about rhetoric, politics, and race.

10/8

#5 **Rhetoric, Race, and Politics II**

read:

- *Frederick Douglass, “What is the Meaning of July 4th ...”
- *James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone,” “Stranger in the Village”
“Letter to My Nephew,” “Interview on John Brown”
- *Barack Obama, Philadelphia Speech on Race

- write:** (a) Use Aristotle/Allen to read Douglass/Baldwin/Obama.
(b) Use Douglass/Baldwin to question Allen’s arguments.

10/15

Rhetoric, Race and Politics III

#6

read: *Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno" in Short Novels
*Kimberlee Crenshaw, "Reel Time/Real Justice"

write: (a) How does "Benito" expose the reader's assumptions about race? Does it advance an "argument" about race? Where does it leave you?
(b) is Melville's story "political" - in what senses?
(c) How do "narratives" shape how people view (racial) inequality?
(d) what would Crenshaw say to Allen?

10/22 **class canceled**

10/29 **Metaphor, Narrative, and Rhetoric**

#7

read: *Ernesto Grassi, Rhetoric and Philosophy, chap 4 (xerox=25 pages)
*George Lakoff, Metaphors We Live By, chaps 1-6/8/21-25 (100 pgs)
*William Addams, "Narrative and Politics" (=30 pages)
***optional:** Aristotle, Poetics, chaps 1-22 (=30 pages)

write: (a)What are the implications of the fact that thinking depending on metaphors?
(b)How do metaphors matter in politics?
(C)Pick one metaphor in politics and analyze its impact.
(D) How does "narrative" matter in politics?
(E) pick one narrative in politics and analyze its impact.

11/5 **class canceled**

11/12 **Language as Speech/Speech as Action**

#8

read: *Hanna Pitkin, Wittgenstein & Justice, (excerpts/xeroxed)
chapters 2,4, 5, 6, 8
*J.L. Austen, Doing Things With Words (excerpts/pages tba)

write: (a) What follows from claiming that we use words not to label a pre-existent world but to perform action, and indeed to constitute (not label) the world?
(b) How does Pitkin explain the difference between Socrates and Thrasymachus?
(c)Does her analysis of "language" shed light on "rhetoric"?
(d)Analyze a recent "performative" act in politics

11/19 Rhetoric and Narrative in Machiavelli I

#9

read: *Niccolo Machiavelli, The Discourses
Machiavelli's preface/introduction
Book One: preface, chaps 1-7/9-12/16-18/25-26/34-35/40/47/53/55/58
Book Two: preface/ chaps 2/10/19/24/29
Book Three: chaps 1-3/7-9/30-31/35/41-42

write: (a) For M, what defines a "republic" or makes a "free people"?
(b) Assess M's narrative (of founding, corruption and renewal)
(c) HOW -by what stylistic devices and metaphors- does the text create meaning?

11/26 no class

12/3 Rhetoric and narrative in machiavelli II

#10

read: *Machiavelli, The Prince (entire)
*Mary Dietz, "Trapping the Prince"
*Victoria Kahn, Machiavellian Rhetoric (excerpts)

write: (a) Does M's "rhetoric" undermine his own (republican) politics?
(b) Does he teach the rhetorical constitution of reality, period, more than he advances a particular partisan political position?
(c) Do his metaphors and his style dramatize or perform a "political" (rather than "moral") approach to the world?

12/10 Mystification and truth in Marx's Rhetoric

#11

read: *Karl Marx, German Ideology (excerpts)
*Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives, p101-14,174-80,180-97
*Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto"
*Marshall Berman, "All That Is Solid....."

TUESDAY

12/15 Truth and Rhetoric in Politics

#12

read: *Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony & Socialist Strategy (excerpts)
*Hanna Pitkin, Wittgenstein and Justice, preface (xerox)
*Susan Griffin, "The Way of All Ideology"

**final paper
due Friday December 18 by noon**