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Political Rhetoric: The Modern Parrhesia

Jessica Townsend

The French philosopher Michel Foucault is best known among academics as a theorizer of human nature and social relationships. Although his areas of expertise did not encompass politics, which he attempted to avoid altogether in his writings, many of his philosophical ideas have been re-examined inside a political context. One of his major theories, the idea of free speech known as parrhesia, has made its way to the foreground of scrutiny by political theorists as well as an internationally-acclaimed expert in rhetoric and professor by the name Laurent Pernot. Since Michel Foucault's original historical analysis of parrhesia, or frankly-spoken truth, on which he lectured at the University of California at Berkeley in 1983, the subject of parrhesia in society has continued to be an ongoing topic of interest for philosophers and social scientists alike. While Foucault was not so interested in the implications of parrhesia in contemporary politics and preferred to focus on the ethical aspect of parrhesia instead (Pernot 2016), his discourse and implications have nevertheless supplied political scientists with a vast concept to explore. Despite the fact that he dismissed rhetoric as incompatible with parrhesia based on the form of speech (Foucault 1983), Foucault never addresses certain inconsistencies with this claim (Pernot 2016). Nevertheless, Laurent Pernot's argument for compatibility between rhetoric and parrhesia in the political arena does take into account Foucault's requirements for parrhesia, and further evidence for a relationship between parrhesia and rhetoric can be determined through Foucault's own research on modernity.

Foucault's concept of parrhesia defines a practice of truth-telling that necessitates certain circumstances. To meet the requirements of parrhesia, one must speak the truth frankly, risk oneself in some

substantial manner by speaking this truth, use this truth to criticize the audience, and feel a sense of duty to speak this criticism (Foucault 1983). The risk that goes along with parrhesia typically includes risk of life, punishment, or significant loss of social standing. Because of this, the truth-teller must be subordinate to the audience. However, the one speaking with parrhesia, the parrhesiastes, also must be free to speak the truth freely of his own accord; meaning that he must also not be a slave or non-citizen, in the case of ancient Greece (Foucault 1983).

It is this attribute of frankness which causes Foucault to determine that rhetoric is incompatible with parrhesia (Foucault 1983). In his lectures, Foucault refers to rhetoric as that form of speech where the speaker uses vague terms and oblique explanations to convince his audience of his point, whether it is a truthful point or not; in contrast, he paints parrhesia as being the more direct and concise form of speech to convey what the speaker truthfully believes (1983). Similarly, Foucault rejects the concept of parrhesia in rhetoric because of the dialect used; he says, "The continuous long speech is a rhetorical or sophistical device, whereas the dialogue through questions and answers is typical for parrhesia" (1983). In short, he determines that rhetoric is only to be applied in long, vague speeches, and parrhesia requires that the language be direct and the speech be in a conversational format.

"Foucault's main focus, is actually a newer form of political parrhesia in which a citizen speaks truthfully to his superior or ruler in order to critique policies."

Laurent Pernot, in his lecture on rhetoric and parrhesia, argues that rhetoric and parrhesia are very compatible (2016). Referencing Foucault's preference to historical analysis, Pernot argues that Foucault neglected a branch of parrhesia, which he refers to as political parrhesia (2016). In his lecture in 2016, Pernot asserted that political parrhesia, which is the equivalent of rhetoric, is actually the root of ethical parrhesia, which is the form of parrhesia of which Foucault spoke: the aforementioned direct truth-telling in dialectic format. Rhetoric, according to Pernot, is the original political speech; it could be seen historically when a citizen of Athens would give a speech to the senate (2016). Pernot asserts that ethical parrhesia, Foucault's main focus, is actually a newer form of political parrhesia in which a citizen speaks truthfully to his superior or ruler in order to critique policies (2016). Instead of speaking generally to a congregation, the speaker is specifically directing his speech at the ruler (2016). Despite the fact that the political parrhesiastes is not directing his critique specifically at the overall ruler, Pernot insists that there is still some level of risk to the speaker; his reputation could be ruined, he could be exiled for corruption, or he could lose his rights to speak (2016). In this case, the speaker is not challenging the ruler, but instead the ruling majority (2016).

Similarly, the political parrhesiastes, or rhetorician, may meet the other requirements of parrhesia (2016). Although they may speak in long lectures, they may speak frankly therein (2016). Although they may speak vaguely and guide the audience toward their own conclusions, they may do so in a dialectic format (2016). Socrates, for example, is a good example of this; although he conversed with his arguers in such a way to debate the topic, he was also very well-known for not giving any direct answers (2016).

The link between Foucault's parrhesia and Pernot's rhetoric may be more easily understood if one takes into account Foucault's interpretation of enlightenment and modernity. Foucault describes the Enlightenment as "the age of the critique," (1984, 38), referencing the philosopher Immanuel Kant to show how enlightenment is the application of reason and logic to determine the best circumstances in a situation (1984, 37). Foucault then describes modernity as relating to enlightenment as an attitude toward the contemporary instead of an overall ideal (1984, 39). In this way, modernity is an attitude that takes into account the current state of affairs both political and ethical; instead of simply being a way to perceive the present, however, it is a way to operate within the present in order to improve existing circumstances inside the confines of the current situation (Foucault 1984, 40-41).

Keeping this concept of modernity in mind, it becomes easier to see how rhetoric may relate to parrhesia. The relationship would be similar to that of enlightenment and modernity; whereas ethical parrhesia is the frank truth-telling of present circumstances to a ruler, rhetoric is that parrhesia which requires a gentler nudge in the direction of truth according to the constraints of the situation at that time. Considering Socrates once more, his debates with others often resulted in the opposing arguer realizing that he no longer believed or understood what he previously thought was certain. If Socrates at this time had simply told his arguers what was wrong with their reasoning, they would not have been convinced of these truths; they would have called him mad, ignored him altogether, or simply had him indicted of corruption much earlier in life because of such controversial beliefs. Instead, Socrates used a rhetorical line of questioning to gently lead his arguers into their own conclusions so that they applied their own reasoning to discern the truth. In this way, Socrates had an attitude of modernity which

required him to use political parrhesia over ethical parrhesia in order to obtain the desired results.

These same concepts may be applied to politicians today. Although politicians in the United States are viewed in a very negative manner, and many of them use rhetoric to convince the audience of what they want instead of what they actually believe as Foucault says, those politicians that are truth-tellers must still use rhetoric in order to lead the audience down the correct path of reasoning. While these politicians may currently be in a position of political power, it is important to note that they still risk their careers in truth-telling even now, particularly in democratic nations such as the United States where the voters hold the power to elect or reprimand their political representatives. To speak truthfully to their constituents can be risky for remaining in office or future elections, even when using that gentler form of political parrhesia instead of the blunt honesty of ethical parrhesia.

At this point it is paramount to distinguish between rhetoric as political parrhesia and the rhetoric used to incite a certain feeling in an audience without reasoning or logic to support it, which has become ever more present in modern politics. Political parrhesia still presupposes a line of clear reasoning supported by evidence and logic, while the former rhetoric only aims to convince the audience based on emotional response, such as fear or pride. A politician that utilizes political parrhesia would guide his or her constituents to the truth by means of observable evidence and reasoning, not simply subjective opinions or baseless claims. While active politicians may utilize both of these forms of rhetoric, it is only political parrhesia that is related

to modernity and therefore ethical parrhesia. Being able to distinguish between these two forms of rhetoric in practice is a more difficult task, and frequently the way a politician is perceived in this regard is what may tip favor toward or against him or her.

Although Foucault's limited views of parrhesia caused him to miss entirely the concept of rhetoric in parrhesia, it is Foucault's work on modernity and parrhesia that enables the determination of relationship between political parrhesia and ethical parrhesia. Through his study of parrhesia, Foucault built the groundwork for Pernot's research into rhetoric and the two distinct forms of parrhesia, enabling him to ascertain the link between rhetoric and political parrhesia. It is through Foucault's studies on enlightenment and modernity that one can then discern the link between ethical parrhesia and political parrhesia that Foucault missed on his own. This was surely largely in part due to his quick dismissal of rhetoric in his early studies.

Nevertheless, this relationship between parrhesia and rhetoric is clear to see once one locates the essential points, and then it can be utilized to more easily understand how truthful speech between politicians and their constituents is conveyed today.