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Power, Identity and Efficiency in the Political Discourse

Abstract: The paper aims to discuss the link between power and identity within the political discourse. Such a link is not always obvious, but lies at the bottom of many semantic structures embedded in this type of discourse. In the same time, the more informative and detailed in the narrative the political discourse is, the less mobilizing it becomes, considering the effects upon the public. Therefore, one can observe that the conditions of existence and the conditions of efficiency for the political discourse represent a provocative field of investigation in itself.

Keywords: political discourse, power, narrative identity, witness identity.

1. Introduction

The present text intends to discuss the link between power and identity within the political discourse. Such a link is not always obvious, but lies at the bottom of many semantic structures embedded in this type of discourse. It is not unaccustomed to conceive the political discourse as an instrument of power or even as a ritual of power (Sălăvăștru 1999, 222), depending on whether or not the relational aspect of communication prevails upon the communicational aspect. In other words, when there is nothing to debate, when the political discourse aims to consolidate only the obedience of the public in front of the leader as a power holder, when the discourse is not any more an instrument of information, but only one of control it becomes a ritual of power.

As to the identity issues, they are implicitly assumed most of the time by the orator, being used for linking together the speaker and his public, mainly because they determine indirectly the perspective upon the social reality of the moment. In this respect, they are linked to the ground

of the arguments developed within the discourse and to the core values that unite the members of a group.

2. Some conditions of possibility for the political discourse

Undoubtedly, political discourse can be seen as a valuable instrument for influencing people (Grecu 2018, 49-60). In this regard, one can take into account the conditions of possibility for it. These conditions can be split in two categories: conditions of existence and conditions of efficiency. The conditions of existence refer to the form of the discourse in terms of linguistic content and argumentative structure. In time, different offers emphasized and refined them. We know, for instance, how important is to create a well-articulated discourse from an argumentative point of view (Meyer 2010, 74). The link among the theses, the reasons and the ground of the argument has to be accessible for the public in order for the discourse to be well understood (Perelman 2012, 32). But, beyond that, the terms used for expressing different ideas have to be accessible as well. Without the fulfillment as such conditions one cannot hope to determine any predictable attitudes of the public, due to the fact that human reasoning can be seen as the only common ability for a wide range of individuals that form the audience.

Even though rationality does not represent the only gate towards the mind of the public (Grecu 2016, 17-26), it cannot be ignored without the risk of transforming the political discourse into a chaotic endeavor. (Sălăvăștru 2001, 40). In the same time, the partitioning of the discourse allows the speaker to devise a well structured communication process with his audience that can be seen as an intelligible path towards the achievement of sharing his own vision on the chosen subject with the public. One can easily observe the fact that all the five parts of the classical discourse have distinct functions within this communication process. Neglecting any of them involves various risks for the speakers and we can easily observe that contemporary discourses include all of them, no matter how shortened that might be. For instance, in the case of a discourse that apparently contains no exordium the reciprocal trust between the speaker and the audience is usually expressed by an addressing formula that is characterized by an obvious familiarity such as: *Brothers!*, *Comrades!*, *Dear fellows!* etc. Thus, the function of the exordium which is directly related to the ethos component of the discourse is taken over by the addressing formula.

As to the narration, no matter how short might it be, its function of sketching an image of the general situation in which the public and the speaker lay together can be taken over by a short paragraph, or even a short sentence like *we live difficult times...*, or *no matter how heavy the burden of the present difficulties might be...* etc. Without such a moment in the structure of the discourse neither the proof, nor the refutation are able to function properly.

3. Efficiency in the political discourse

The presence of all these structural elements within the architecture of the discourse can be seen as a necessary condition for the existence of the discourse. But the fulfillment of these existence conditions is not enough for obtaining an optimized communication act, giving the fact that a discourse is not a simple presentation of facts which mainly involves the act of transmitting information to the public. The political discourse aims to change the behavior to the public; therefore one could be forced to think about the efficiency conditions of this communication process as well.

At this point, we can remember from natural sciences that efficiency is usually defined as a ratio between the energy consumed in a process and the effects obtained by the consumption of that energy. Thus, a physical process is more efficient when stronger effects are obtained by consuming less energy. Now, if we see the political discourse as a process in which various kinds of resources are consumed, we could evaluate its efficiency as a communicative process. We might think about the various kinds of resources needed for devising and delivering a political discourse. We could take into account the cognitive resources of the author, of the speaker and the public. Time represents another valuable and irreplaceable resource consumed. Emotional or psychological resources are consumed as well on this occasion for maintaining the attention of the audience to the speaker, but also the efforts of the speaker to open and to maintain the communication channels towards his audience (Stănciugelu, 2014, 243). The use of certain words, the succession of certain ideas, and the use of the specific style can improve the final effect of spending all this different kinds of resources. At this point we can talk about efficiency conditions which involve a fine tuning of the discourse as communicational endeavor to the intellectual and psychological specificity of the public. Without such fine tuning, the efficiency of the discourse will be diminished.

When we speak about performance in building and delivering a political discourse, we could think about a strategy of attaining an optimizing task regarding the shape of the discourse and the manner in which the discourse is delivered. We might think about an ideal solution that fulfills the most drastic requirements regarding the ethos, the pathos and the logos. And we propose an exercise of imagination with methodological use: how could be formulated *an ideal* political discourse in which logos, ethos and pathos are cultivated at the best?

First of all, we have to decide what the main goal of such a discourse is. Is it conceived as a tool for informing people, is it a tool for mobilizing people by convincing them of something, by persuading them of something or by manipulating them. What could be the *alethic* profile of such a discourse and what could be the positioning of the speaker in front of his audience in terms of authority and what kind of authority could be cultivated by the speaker in front of his public in order to achieve his goals? As we will see, the answers to these questions will lead us to a structural dilemma regarding the shape of the discourse.

Any audience can be unified by the speaker around a set of core values which are shared by the people in a conscious or even an unconscious manner. The set of values can vary from culture to culture, from one social class to another, but can also depend on the historical moment. Regardless all these variables truth represents a universal value shared by the majority of the people. Therefore, any speaker should be highly interested in consolidating his own ethos by cultivating truth in his relation with the public. Usually, the public will appreciate this preoccupation for truth, the very argumentative authority (Sălăvăstru 2003, 33) of the discourse laying on the assumption that the speaker presents true information in front of his audience. Of course, there are some exceptional situations in which the audience prefers to be lie, as an awkward effect of being exposed for a long time to manipulation. Apart from that, the preference for truth characterizes the most part of the audiences and the opportunity of appearing sincere is a real one for the most part for the speakers, up to a certain point at least. But how could appear the speaker as sincere as possible to his public? Naturally, such a goal could be achieved by developing a discursive scheme as detailed and as objective as possible. This involves a careful selection of the most relevant facts that defined the social–political situation of the moment.

In assuming an objective stance upon the general situation, the speaker will be forced to introduce in his selection not only those aspects that are in favor of his own thesis, but also some other aspects that cannot

be used directly in devising his argument. Somehow, this behavior might be considered as counterproductive in terms of argumentative efficiency. But in the same time, the benefits in terms of positive image in front of his public are clear, his credibility as an objective analyst of the social-political situation being consolidated by such a behavior.

The problem of such an *alethic* profile of the discourse becomes obvious when we realized what could be the effect of delivering to the public of such a rich view upon social reality. In terms of values, the most informative discourse of all, in other words, the most oriented towards the truth is the scientific discourse. Therefore, the more informative the political discourse becomes, the less mobilizing it becomes, because the natural reaction of the public in front of such a rich discursive scheme might be that of entering in a "questioning mode". As an effect, reflection might replace the action in the mind of the listeners, which is suitable for a depictive scientific discourse, but far less suitable for an effective political discourse. The surprising conclusion of this could be that a mobilizing political discourse is condemned to be less informative simply because it has to have an intentionally oriented discursive scheme.

The subjectivity of the political speaker becomes contagious for his public and the discursive scheme of an efficient political discourse has to be less informative and less objective than that of the scientific discourse. For example, even those political discourses inspired by historical facts are much less informative and less objective when describe historical facts in comparison of academic ones. In conclusion, the relation with the truth of the political speaker is negatively influenced by his pragmatic goals as influencer.

Nevertheless, we can distinguish the democratic political discourse from the totalitarian one. The mark that differentiates them could be the attitude towards the political adversary that might have another opinion about the same historical events. The totalitarian discourse rejects the vary possibility of another lecture giving to the facts whilst the democratic discourse values the differences among various opinion, celebrating their diversity as an indispensable ingredient of the social progress. At this point, one could easily remember the old dispute between Plato and Aristotle as far as the discovering of the truth is concerned (Charteris-Black 2018, 4).

On one hand, the totalitarian discourse pretends to hold the unique and absolute truth which is supposedly shared to the public for the benefit of all social classes. On the other hand, the democratic discourse, cherishing the difference of opinion as a precious ingredient of the debate,

delivers its own reading of the facts considering the relative truth as the only attainable one. Roosevelt, Kennedy or Thatcher are good examples in this regard (Hywel 2009, 224). This difference in the basic attitude towards the truth differentiates the relations between two categories of the speakers and their public in terms of identity as well.

In fact, the totalitarian speaker pretends to be the exclusive holder of an absolute truth, which makes him to adopt a messianic identity positioning in front of his public. This places him in front of a contradictory situation. On one hand, in terms of identity authority, the beholder of the unique truth can hope to impose the most profound respect, but on the other hand this kind of positioning create a considerable psychological distance between the speaker, and the inspired leader and his audience. That is why this type of speaker adopts in front of his public a complementary identity stance, that of a *comrade, mate or brother*, who brings him another type of credibility rooted in the relation based on familiarity among him and *his people*. We find this type of addressing al Martin Luther King, who speaks to *his people* in the name of a core set of moral values (Hywel 2009, 112). But this particular combination between proximity and distance can be also observed in the case of different authoritarian dictators that cultivated such an identity relation with their listeners. The cases of Napoleon, Hitler or Stalin are memorable in this regard.

In the case of Napoleon (Montefiore 2015, 45), the identity component based on familiarity, on the closeness to his soldiers is more subtle, giving the fact his authority as speaker, is based on his military genius, which is implicitly invoked on different occasion when the general military situation of the French army is described and various strategic measures are proposed. Nevertheless, the familiarity between him and his comrades from the Old Guard becomes obvious when he directly addresses to them, appreciating their courage in defending the glory of France. So, the *Mother Country* represents the common ground on which Napoleon and his soldiers become brothers in arms, in spite of his military genius. There is a moment in his discourses when the courage of risking for life for defending *La France* unifies the speaker and his army brothers exalting the moral feelings of the audience. In his case, the moral order of the discourse conceals an opposite pragmatic order: by making his soldiers to believe that when fighting for Napoleon they fight for France, Bonaparte makes his soldiers to fight for him when fighting for France. The contrast between the moral order of the discourse and the pragmatic order illustrates in the case

of Napoleon the efficiency of the super positions between familiar identity and unfamiliar identity components.

Apart from being a “prophetic” or inspired leader of the German people, Hitler (Montefiore 2015, 97) positioned in the same time as a soldier who bravely fulfilled his duty to his country in the First War World, which made him to appear in the consciousness of the German citizens as a brother with an acute moral instinct that allowed him to risk his own life for defending *Das Vatherland*. A quite similar speaker identity can be detected in the case of Stalin, who wanted to appear in front of his comrades as a protective father who urges them to fight for *Mother Russia*.

At the level of the discourse, the contrast between the real identity of the speaker and the pretended identity plays no role whatsoever. For instance, it had no importance for the France soldiers that Napoleon had Italian origins, being a *circumstantial French citizen* tempted in his youth to even fight against the France army as a Corsican nationalist. In a similar way, Hitler hides very well his Austrian origins when talking in front of German citizens. The same can be remarked in the case of Stalin (Montefiore 2015, 109) who's Georgian origins are cleverly hidden when he speaks in front of his comrades about *Mother Russia*.

In contrast with the totalitarian political discourse, the democratic one involves a different *alethic* stance. The democratic speaker knows very well that his own lecture of socio-political realities is not the only possible one, but he assumes that his own is suitable for the kind the public he is dealing with. The relative truth he delivers throughout his discourse is convenient for a certain amount of people that belong to a specific social category in terms of social class, Wealth or ideological orientation. For him, to be perceived as *one of them* is equally important. Therefore, he attitudinize himself as a member of the social category of people that are listening to him, his authority being that of a friend able to identify the most relevant aspects of reality for his people. He lives with the everlasting possibility of being rejecting or replace by his fellows, due to democratic pluralism society he lives in.

As a consequence, the kind of relative truth delivered by him has to be comfortable and attractive for the listeners. However, he has to resist to the temptation of lying to them in order to maintain his credibility on a medium and long term. The solution is that of presenting the selection of facts interpreted in a subjective way and delivering the subjective narrative as if it was an objective one. This kind of *alethic* profile of the discourse transforms it into a persuasion tool. The totalitarian speaker

cultivates the power of being the only option for his public, even a prophetic one, whereas the democratic speaker, no matter what ideology cultivates the perpetual possibility of being chosen again and again. Therefore, his endeavor is based on delivering some kind of identity comfort to his followers.

Considering all of the above, we can conclude that the way of functioning as a power tool is considerably different for the two types of political discourse into account. The totalitarian one becomes a ritual of power in which the discursive scheme pretends to replace the very social reality it describes, whereas the democratic discourse functions as a power tool which consumes the fuel of patience and enthusiasm for the psychological comfort felt by the public when following the vision of a “sibling” with a similar axiological bias as himself. One awkward situation in this regard appears when the naivety of the orator regarding the complex socio-political situation of the moment superposes over the wishful thinking of the public which is inclined to believe him not because the orator succeeded to be really convincing and argumentative coherent, but merely because his fragmentary vision upon reality is a convenient one. The case of Chamberlain is particularly illustrative in this regard.

The manner in which the speaker addresses to the public reveals the relationship between the *narrative identity* assumed by the speaker and the identity *given* to the public by the speaker. We will call this second identity attributed to the public *witness identity*. The relation between the narrative identity and the witness identity induces a certain structure of authority within the political discourse, depending on how big the distance between the two is. For instance, when a political speaker addresses to the public like a father to his children, we can talk about a paternalistic relation of power developed within the political discourse or reinforced by it. Such a relation is based on sheer inequality, but in the same time involves some kind of closeness or intimacy that comforts the public in a special way. Political leaders like Stalin or Mao took full advantage of such relations that helped them to consolidate the position of an absolute ruler, compensating the tensions raised by their absolute rule of power by the illusion of a protective authority exerted over their subjects. In their case, as in the cases of many other dictators, the discourse became a repetitive ritual of power capable of inoculating in the minds of the people a certain image of reality. In fact, the lecture of socio-political reality embedded in the discursive scheme was translated to the public in an authoritative manner throughout a seduction process that

mixed ideology with personal authority focusing upon the identity between the personality of the leader and the state itself.

When addressing to his *brothers* or to his *comrades* the speaker initiates another type of relation with his public, based on some sort of common experience. Sometimes, such an experience that bounds people together is accumulated in a context dominated by a specific set of rules based, on their turn, on a specific set of values, as it is the case with the army. Therefore, military leaders use in their favor the mutual trust developed throughout such experiences, especially when they decide to fructify it in a political manner, as in the case of Caesar, Napoleon, Eisenhower or De Gaulle. (Hywel 2009, 105)

4. Conclusions

We can conclude that, depending on the manner of addressing the public, depending on whether or not the public feels comfortable with the identity game suggested to him, the political speaker initiates throughout his discourse a complex and subtle relation of power which can be revealed by following a few indexes. Among them, the addressing formulae and the *alethic* profile of the narrative of the discourse play an important role in revealing the implicit power relationship between the orator and his public. In the same time, there is no unique or ideal pattern of efficiency for the political discourse that can assure in the same time the development of an equidistant and completely objective perspective upon socio-political realities of the moment, due to the tension between the informative character of the discourse and the mobilizing character of it. The more informative and detailed in the narrative the political discourse is, the less mobilizing it becomes, considering the fact that the listeners will be tempted to adopt an analytical and meditative stance towards the presented facts. Therefore, the conditions of existence and the conditions of efficiency for the political discourse represent a provocative field of investigation in itself.

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