UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

UEA
University of East Anglia

NOP Network for Oratory and Politics

Political Studies Association
Rhetoric and Politics

The Crisis of Rhetoric

Renewing Political Speech and Speechwriting

Arts & Humanities Research Council

Introduction to the Workshop

- We began in September 2017.

- Six workshops: Queen Mary, Birmingham, Glasgow, Norwich, UCL.

- Seven academic disciplines: Ancient History, Classics, History, Linguistics, Media Studies, Philosophy, Politics.

- 120+ participants.

Our original goals

- To develop common ground and a shared vocabulary uniting rhetoric researchers from varied disciplines working on different historical periods;

- To develop knowledge of the challenges and difficulties faced by political speakers and speechwriters in the UK today;

- To enable the application of rhetorical concepts and methods to the critical study of media rhetoric in British politics, including forms of rhetoric associated with online debate and discourse;

- To apply ancient and modern rhetorical theory and analysis to the interpretation and assessment of examples of contemporary political speech;

- To produce a short report recommending new methods in speechwriting and speechmaking practice and ways for journalists to present political debate.

Crisis?

2012: A YouGov poll finds 62% agreeing that 'politicians tell lies all the time and you can't believe a word they say'.

2014: Focus group research for The Fabian Society in 2014 found people want to see politicians change 'who they are, *the way that they talk* and act').

2016: The Electoral Reform Society describes the EU referendum campaign as 'a potent cocktail of low levels of information, high levels of mistrust and considerable negativity from the campaigns'.

2017: IPSOS/MORI finds that 19% trust ministers to tell the truth 17% for politicians generally (but little change since 1983).

2018: YouGov finds that 11% trust politicians to tell the truth 'a great deal or a fair amount' (worse than estate agents but but better than journalists on red-tops).

Was there a 'Golden Age'?

Lord Curzon (1913) saw "a decline of oratorical furniture in the rapid diminution of quotation and literary allusion in the speeches of the day".

He also worried about the media: 'now that every word is taken down and that the speaker, particularly the prominent or Front Bench speaker, knows that he is addressing, not a private club, but a gathering that may embrace the whole nation… he must walk delicately and measure his paces; he cannot frisk and frolic in the flowery meads of rhetoric; he dare not "let himself go"'

Those in whom "the silver of ordinary speech is turned into gold on his lips" and whose speech "strikes a chord in our heart which thrills as though it has been touched by celestial fingers'" still exist but are a minority.

What we mean by a 'crisis'

- A crisis is a turning point: a change in the condition of something

- Rhetoric is one part of a 'system': parties, Parliament, publics, political ideologies, a political 'imaginary', a 'rhetorical culture', means of communication…

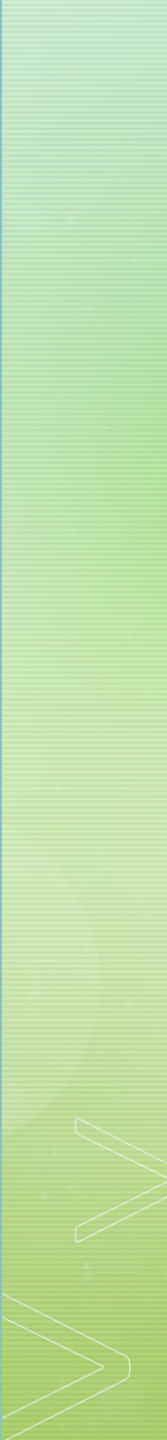- By 'crisis' we mean a change in the condition of that system

Systemic Pressures on Rhetorical Culture

- A crisis of 'rhetorical statecraft'

- Increased political complexity *and* powerlessness

- Politicians' 'fear of words'

- Decline in the institutions of political speech

- Waning of the dialogical aspect of monological speech

- Complex and varied 'forms' of media communication

- Lack of respect for the craft of speechwriting
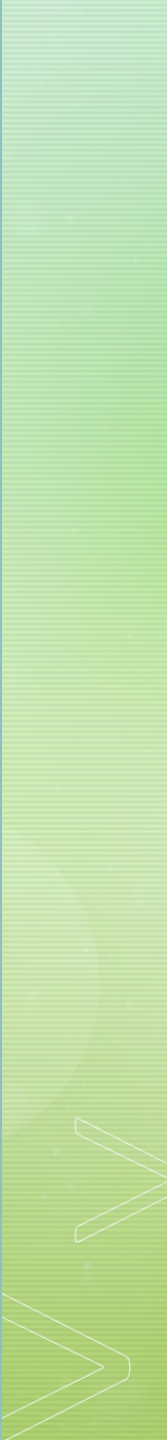
Session 1:

A Crisis of Appeals

A Crisis of Appeals

The Three Classical Appeals

- Ethos

- Logos

- Pathos

ETHOS

1) Character: authority & credibility (trust);

2) Performance: of a role in the 'social drama';

                    of archetypes ('embodied metaphors')

3) Identification and Community

4) How we are oriented in and relate to the world (to the past and the future)

The Crisis of Ethos 1

Ethos vs. Authenticity

Closeness vs. distance (origin, location, social type)

'Ordinariness' vs 'rhetorical style'

The Crisis of Ethos 2

Which Community?

Imagined Community requires:

      shared reference points

      common narratives and archetypes
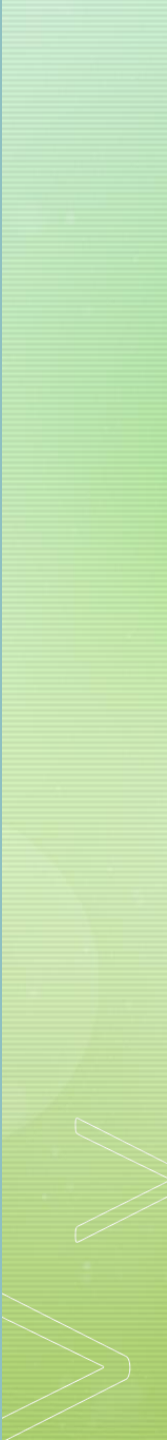
      functioning cultural memory

When these are contested ethos becomes partisan, based on exclusivity and crude archetypes; rhetoric becomes 'epideictic' – focused on 'praise or blame'.

The Crisis of Ethos 3

The 'permanent present' of contemporary politics

- the lack of *political* memory

- no time to develop rhetorical character
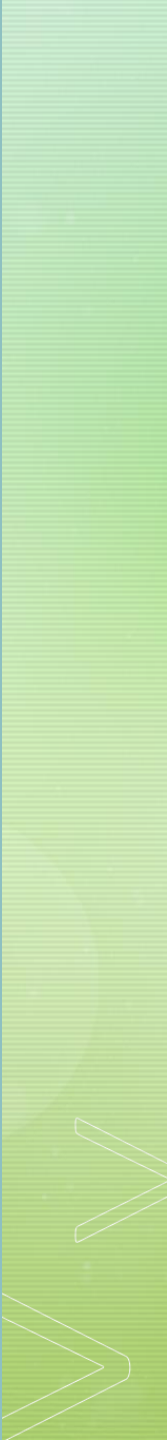
- no orientation to the future

Logos

Enthymemes: The rhetorical form of logical argument

The 'flesh and blood' of persuasion

They: concern 'probabilities'

connect propositions to 'common sense'

connect 'particulars' to 'universals'

involve audiences in collective reasoning

The Crisis of Logos 1

The enthymeme as 'hook' not 'challenge'

  not deliberative; treating audiences as of fixed opinion

  appealing to 'prejudice'; 'pandering'

  prevents the exercise of 'rhetorical citizenship'

The Crisis of Logos 2

What's the question?

Rhetoric speaks to 'a question'

It 'negotiates the distance' between those addressing it

Enthymemes are increasingly used to achieve 'negation' rather than 'modification'; to increase 'distance' and remove legitimacy from opponents; to make 'ad hominem' arguments

Problem 3:   Which facts?

Recommendations:

1. Research: the 'places' of ethos and logos.

2. Thinking of speeches as arguments not presentations; not 'writing' or 'advertising' but as a broader political, philosophical and literary practice.

3. Reflecting on the use of pronouns and verbs and other ways of creating unity or distance.

4. Consistency and continuity of character development.

5. Continuity in arguments not only slogans

6. Facts.

SESSION 2

Speechwriting & Speechwriters

Speechwriting & Speechwriters

What is the role of the speechwriter?

- Speechwriter as amanuensis

- Speechwriter as editor

- Speechwriter as copywriter

- Speechwriter as decorator

Speechwriting & Speechwriters

Speechwriting traditions

- Ancient world: logographers or not – Athens and Rome

- Modern world:

- Rhetoric a scholarly discipline in itself, tradition of training in speechwriting, sense of speechwriting community

- Rhetoric a scholarly discipline within other disciplines, little tradition of training in speechwriting, little sense of speechwriting community

Speechwriting & Speechwriters

Problems for Speechwriters

1. Lack of access

2. Last-minute involvement

3. Expected only to make things 'pretty'

4. Speeches amended to meet external demands

5. Speeches seen as 'one-off'

Speechwriting & Speechwriters

Speechwriter Training

▪ No standard training or overall professional vocational training

▪ Unclear sense of the 'profession'

▪ Not always a single role

▪ Evidence of imitation of American models – not always appropriate

Speechwriting & Speechwriters

Recommendations:

1) Learn from the Classics

2) Enhanced training in speechwriting

3) Training for speakers and writers in different 'genres'

4) Rhetorical education in schools

5) Speechwriter accreditation?

Session 3

Rhetoric and the Media

Rhetoric and the Media

News Reporting

- Effects of shift to second-hand accounts of speeches; from 'amplifier' to 'filter'

- Speeches adapted to 're-mediation'; 'predigested'

- Who or what has power over the 'stage' rules

Rhetoric and the Media

Television

1) 'Multi-modality' challenges traditional rhetoric;

The 'specificity' of political speech can be lost to 'TV Talk';

Good Rhetoric vs Good Television?

2) TV promotes the appearance of 'intimacy'

Evidence for increased 'personalisation' and 'informalisation'; 'conversational'

In 1945 speeches evaluated as occasions "for politicians to demonstrate virtues and vices), and for citizens to know, judge, and distinguish politicians" (Stoker et. al.,)

In 2005 Speakers evaluated as 'normal' or not, as 'representatives OF rather than FOR the people'.

Rhetoric and the Media

Leaders' Debates:

Evidence for 'rhetorical citizenship'

But research finds reporting focused on who won not what was said, on the 'process' and on 'correctness' of behaviour

Gendered reporting

Rhetoric and the Media

New Media

Hansard Audit 2018: "News or news programmes on TV or radio were the leading source of election-related news or information at the 2017 general election: at 69%, they had a reach 20 points beyond any other source"; 48% of the public report having undertaken no form of online political engagement in the last year.

But: 43% of 18-34s watched politically-related videos online (compared to 15% of over-55s).

You Tube is a major source of political rhetoric and ideas; new kinds of rhetorician are becoming popular (unrestrained by Party or Profession).

Platforms promote particular rhetorical dispositions

Media and Rhetoric

Recommendations:

More Debates: Following Scandinavian example, make them an expectation while lowering the risk

Actual Debates: not just Q&A

Specific Topics: There should be debates on single topics/issues

Use of New Media: You Tube for 'explanatory' rhetoric

Rhetorical Criticism: A reporting culture of rhetorical as well as political criticism