

Politics and Rhetoric

A critical introduction

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1 The power of persuasion

It is difficult to imagine politics without persuasion. By its very nature politics requires choices to be formulated, options to be weighed and decisions to be made. Often the uncertainty or ambiguity of the world forces us to confront a plurality of contrasting perceptions of our situation and opposed views of how to act. At such moments – moments of dramatic crisis, perhaps, but also in the more routine, day-to-day choices – people need to be persuaded in order to proceed with any degree of confidence. If everything was certain and clear, if nothing were open to chance, it would be a world without choices, a strangely unhuman world devoid of the anxieties such choices generate. However attractive that sounds to you, it would be, nonetheless, a world without politics.

Persuasion is integral to politics because politics involves making judgements in contexts of uncertainty about what to do. To persuade in such contexts involves transforming, primarily by means of argument, a variety of possible options into a unified judgement, perhaps even a decision. There are many ways to persuade, no doubt, and threatening violence is one of the most common. But human communities are perhaps unique in their use of speech in making persuasion a matter not always or exclusively of brute force, but also of mutual understanding, shared perceptions and interpretations, however temporary or tenuous. The power of persuasion, then, can be just as effective as – if not more so than – the force of arms. Indeed, organized violence is usually accompanied by some effort at justification to make it appear the right thing to do. It would be fair to say, then, that speech – the ability to address others and to define problems and their solutions – is the dominant medium of persuasion in human societies. Knowing how to speak – whether in voiced words, written text or a combination of both – in order to successfully persuade may be *the* fundamental political knowledge or skill, arguably the original ‘political science’. The ancient name given to the body of knowledge whose object is the practice of speech and persuasion is *rhetoric*.

The purpose of this book is to introduce readers to the study of rhetoric in politics. That means grasping common ways in which techniques of persuasion operate in political life; how argumentative strategies are employed to shape judgements. But it also means understanding how the parameters of political debate are themselves conditioned, delimiting who can argue, about what and how. In this latter sense, rhetoric is more than just a collection of nifty techniques;

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it is bound up with wider issues in political theory concerning the nature of power, authority and citizenship.

Rhetoric, I am suggesting, reveals to us the character of *the political*; that is, how, in speech encounters of various kinds, the limits of human association are acknowledged, fabricated and contested. Speech aimed at persuasion – whether in private or in public – is a powerful channel of energies, one directed as much at fashioning human subjects and the conditions under which they make choices as it is at moulding their judgements. To harness these energies is to lay claim to a power to generate a force of some kind – perhaps a force of agency, public opinion or community – to confront the uncertainties of the world.

In politics, then, speech mobilizes the power of persuasion. In the chapters that follow I offer a rhetorical approach to politics aimed at illuminating how persuasive speech garners this power and how rhetorical tools can help us understand it. But rhetoric – like politics itself – is riven with controversy and sometimes confusion. In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that its controversial nature alerts us to the intrinsically political dimension of persuasive speech and communication, the way in which these simultaneously disclose and mask relations of power. I then set out the approach to rhetoric adopted in this book and sketch the content of its chapters.

What is rhetoric?

The word ‘rhetoric’ derives from the ancient Greek *rhetorike*, meaning the ‘art’ (*tekhne*, or skill) of persuasive discourse undertaken by a *rhetor* (an orator or speaker) (see Burke, 1969: 49–55). It refers simultaneously to instruction in this practice and to the persuasive qualities of a discourse itself. That makes it – perhaps rather oddly – both a mode of enquiry and the object of that enquiry. Studying rhetoric can mean either learning about the skills of persuasion (that is, taking instruction in communicative techniques in order to achieve persuasion) or finding the persuasive element in a discourse (that is, examining ‘its’ rhetoric). Consequently, it is difficult wholly to separate subject and object, the human skill of persuasion from the intrinsic persuasiveness of a discourse. This raises a number of questions. When we are persuaded, is it because an idea or an argument just *is* persuasive? Or is persuasion a consequence of purposeful manipulation on the part of the speaker? Does the force of persuasion derive from a technique (that can be mastered by anyone) or from an independent quality (that only the gifted can know)? These questions, arising from the definition of rhetoric, underpin a deeper, fundamental uncertainty that haunts politics more generally. What is happening when people form their judgements? Why do they believe what they do? How can we know they are the right judgements? Can people be persuaded of *anything*?

These questions about the sources and validity of persuasion have come to warp our perception of the practice itself. Today the study of rhetoric remains present largely on the margins of democratic life, the preoccupation of classics scholars and, sometimes, nostalgic journalists. The word has an unfortunate, musty aura

reminiscent of the book titles in the darker quarters of a university library. Indeed, more often than not these days the term is associated with speech oriented primarily towards deception, superficiality or manipulation. ‘Rhetoric’ is routinely contrasted with speech that adheres to ‘reality’ or with the ‘truth’ that can be found ‘behind’ words, the truth of real ‘interests’ or intentions that are deliberately obscured by language.

That rather negative use of the term is not how rhetoric is understood in this book. But let us not dismiss it without a thought. For it gives a clue to the ambivalent feelings we frequently have for persuasion in democracies, where speech is simultaneously an essential ingredient of politics but, quite often, the perceived source of its decline. Clearly, democracy means little without the opportunity to speak freely in public, to air our views, to persuade others of their value, to hold to account our politicians and governments and demand answers from them, perhaps even to become leaders ourselves and speak to, and on behalf of, our fellow citizens. Free speech, from this point of view, is not just a luxury in a democracy: it is its *sine qua non*, that without which popular judgements would be unable to influence public authority. But, at the same time, we are forever wary that free speech can result in the dissemination of the most ill-informed, repulsive and sometimes injurious views as contenders for public judgement. Democracy permits the spiteful, the prejudiced and the plain small-minded to have their say as much as it does the noble, the wise and the eloquent. It allows politicians to talk in simplistic ‘soundbites’ or grey, technocratic jargon so as to evade serious scrutiny. When they aren’t pandering to public opinion, don’t politicians regularly get accused of offering only ‘hot air’ precisely because we know it doesn’t usually translate into practical change?

In modern democracies we despise and fear speech just as much as (if not more than) we honour it. We curse the ‘liars’ and the deceivers just as we desire inspiration and eloquence from our leaders. For every Rev. Martin Luther King Jr or Sir Winston Churchill there are many more, sadly less inspiring politicians to hand. Worse still, there are demagogues and firebrands only too willing to seduce us into endorsing the most despicable choices. Each uses the medium of speech, but how do we tell them apart? Persuasive speech, we might say, functions as both poison and cure to democracy. By consequence, the skill of rhetoric, where speech is deliberately manipulated to render it persuasive, is quietly cherished but – more often than not – dismissed and derided.

Politics, power and the political

The suspicion displayed by many towards rhetoric is a reminder that persuasion involves the exercise of power. But what kind of power is it? Not one whose effects and limits are always easy to define objectively. At one level, persuasion is a process whereby we are invited freely to give our assent, or not, to a point of view or claim. As the rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke wrote: ‘Persuasion involves choice, will; it is directed to a man only in so far as he is *free*’ (Burke, 1969: 50; italics in original). Unlike propaganda or physical force, persuasion requires some

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independence of judgement, an ability to weigh up or assess an argument and choose or refuse to endorse it. In short, persuasion involves letting oneself be persuaded.

Yet, at another level, to be persuaded is a way of submitting to another. While we usually don't mind being persuaded by people we trust, or when little is at stake, in politics it is often relative strangers who seek our support, sometimes on matters of great significance. As Burke also points out, persuasion invites us not only to agree abstractly but, often, to *identify* with the point of view of someone separate from us: 'If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity' (ibid.: 22). Yet because of this urge to identify or create a sense of unity between speaker and audience, we may also be conscious that to affirm another's arguments is also to approve of their authority over us – perhaps their superior intelligence or their right to make decisions in our name – or to link us to further judgements of which we may disapprove. Persuasion in politics is often a way of achieving or keeping office, of using resources in specific ways, of weakening opponents or sustaining alliances. To seek or to be the subject of persuasion is therefore to engage in subtle relations of power and to be complicit in some way with them. This complicity is all the more binding because we freely choose to accept it.

Uncertainty over the power of persuasion directs us towards a fundamental theoretical distinction that is of increasing significance to contemporary social and political theory and that will guide the discussion in this book: the distinction between 'politics' and the dimension of 'the political'. Hostility to rhetoric, I want to suggest, often represents an urge to minimize or remove altogether the political dimension from politics, to empty speech of the sense of power, contingency and controversy that the political arouses and to isolate judgement from the risks of possible manipulation. But first, what is the difference between these two terms? The distinction could be said to be between established social institutions and practices and the wider principles that 'ground' the polity and define its parameters and purposes (see Mouffe, 2005: 8–9). Politics refers, broadly, to the activities of administering and bargaining between organized interests, forming coalitions, developing policy and taking decisions on the basis of instituted relations and procedures (or the 'rules of the game'). The political, on the other hand, denotes the abstract frames or principles that define, for example, who gets represented, what kind of issues are legitimate topics of dispute and which social groups are recognized as 'acceptable' participants in politics, or not. The political names a dimension of controversy and, potentially, violence where some options are ruled in and others ruled out. It is sometimes argued to be 'ontological' in that it concerns the *being* – or basic identity – of social and political existence (Marchart, 2007). Thus we might say that the routine work of assemblies and parliaments, politicians and activists, government officials and civil servants largely comprises politics, while ideas about sovereignty, freedom or justice invoke the political.

Politics is always premised on the partial settling of political questions. Without some idea of what politics is for (to serve the common good, protect liberties

or increase national glory, for example) or how different agents relate (as equal parts in an organic whole, a rigid hierarchy or a diverse plurality), politics would collapse into random exchanges lacking any coherence or durability. Politics therefore depends upon the political dimension to define limits to what can legitimately be said and done, not just in terms of law but also in terms of the ideals that inform the law. The political is not therefore a separate domain but a horizon inside which the myriad activities of politics are given coherence. Beyond the horizon, however, lies uncertainty and the threatening (or liberating) realization that politics might be done quite differently.

One reason why rhetoric is viewed with such suspicion, I want to suggest, is that it is frequently a marker of the contingency of our political horizon, its essentially groundless nature. That is to say, the basic structure of all political relations – the constitutive principles defining the space and time given over to the exchanges of politics – is founded not on eternal truths set in stone but on historical, fundamentally arbitrary and hence contentious decisions about who citizens are and how they relate to each other and the world. Judgements on these decisions are always, in principle, open to contest and reformulation, reflecting power relations that can be challenged and changed. But their contingency is something that is often resisted for fear that social order will be undermined.

The dismissal of rhetoric is one symptom of that concern. Sometimes it reflects an anxiety about what are regarded as ‘basic truths’ collapsing into ‘mere politics’ – that is, sacred principles being exposed to the amoral cut-and-thrust of party advantage and strategy. Thus the desire to eliminate rhetoric often comes in the form of a longing for certainty and security about these truths or via the image of a purified language that can eradicate scurrilous manipulation from judgement-making (see Garsten, 2006; Fish, 1989: 471–78). Or it might even take the form of a politics reduced to technocratic problem solving, removed from public life altogether and untroubled by controversial questions. At an extreme, such anti-political longing emerges as a violent refusal to accept that the organizing principles by which any group or society creates its shared world could or should ever be put into question. As we shall see later, eliminating rhetoric has been a feature of anti-political thinking for centuries.

Indeed, it is when the dimension of the political is brought into view – that is, when politics is understood as premised upon contingent decisions over basic principles – that the potential violence underlying human association is dramatically revealed. Such was the case, for example, during the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011, when a politics instituted around dictators was challenged by publics who no longer acquiesced to their rule. The political dimension that infuses all institutionalized politics is an uncomfortable, sometimes inconvenient reminder that such arrangements are premised not on nature, identity or universal agreement but, rather, on past decisions to coerce, exclude, suppress or ignore alternative arrangements. Often, public discourse can itself help repress such decisions, especially when such discourse is restricted to empty rituals, narrow routinized exchanges or formal procedures. But, as the rebels and protestors of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (among others) demonstrated, new discourses can also reactivate the political

dimension, exposing the habits and customs of institutionalized politics to the threat of their own dissolution.

Rhetoric is often dismissed because implicit to it is the nagging realization that there is always another argument to be made, an alternative point of view, that threatens consensus and order. It reveals public judgements to consist of certainties that have to be actively made, not assumed, and hence politics is ultimately a risky, uncertain and rather inconclusive business. But instead of eliminating the political from speech and persuasion, we could instead try to restore it and face up to its challenge. Rhetorical persuasion might properly be understood as a form of *mediation* between politics and the political. That is to say, argumentative practices link routine politics to essentially contentious judgements about the basic dimensions and limits of human association, reinforcing, contesting or even repressing them in varying degrees. In that respect, there is always a trace of violence (whether real or implied) that surrounds political rhetoric because ‘matters of principle’ invoke the limits of what is thinkable and do-able. As Slavoj Žižek has remarked, although language is often perceived as the medium for mutual recognition and peaceful exchange, ‘there is something violent in the very symbolisation of a thing’ (Žižek, 2008a: 52). Language, he argues, carves up the world into meaningful ‘things’, inserting them within one symbolic frame rather than another. In politics, the fundamentally arbitrary character of that frame is, to some extent, always partially exposed. We are never very far away, therefore, from the ‘unconditional violence’ – as Žižek puts it – which underscores all language and threatens to manifest itself materially in state repression, ‘terrorism’ or resistance, rebellion or dissent.

We can detect this underlying political dimension at work in rhetoric when the basic limits of association are perceived to be at stake, giving rise to controversy and a sense of unease or danger (see Marchart, 2007: 38–44). International politics is replete with such situations in which a precarious order is brought into question. Think, for instance, of Winston Churchill’s wartime speeches as British Prime Minister in the 1940s. His powerful, sombre orations before parliament and on public radio are now widely admired for their steadfast determination to defeat the Nazi enemy ‘at all costs’ and to protect the independence of the United Kingdom. At stake here were the very foundations of civility, sovereignty and freedom. Churchill’s rhetoric is routinely invoked as an exemplary patriotic and inspirational voice, rising above the fray of normal politics to express deeply felt common values and unifying its audience around the defence of fundamental principles – what Burke called identification. A profoundly political sensibility permeates these speeches, charging them with a sense of the underlying violence of the situation.

Yet it would be mistaken to think that Churchill’s speeches expressed an entirely uncontentious set of values. In fact, his rapid rise to national leadership in 1940 came as a consequence of serious disagreement over the policy of appeasement followed by Prime Minister Chamberlain before him. A substantial part of the political class had been convinced that war could be avoided by negotiating with Hitler. The purported failure of that policy became a matter of public controversy

in popular books such as *Guilty Men* (written by the anonymous ‘Cato’; see Cato, 2010), which denounced erstwhile leaders and ridiculed their strategy. Churchill came to power on the heels of controversy and, certainly in the early period of his premiership, remained a figure of suspicion even in his own party (thus, in order to prevent instability in his government, he retained many of the pre-war leaders, including Chamberlain). Only after the experience of war, once Churchill’s qualities as a statesman were confirmed, was ‘appeasement’ universally regarded as a derogatory term for poor international policy. We easily forget the controversy that prepares the way for the ascendancy of principle.

It is wrong, then, to think that the political dimension exists entirely in isolation from the strategic aspect of politics. In the daily flurries of institutional politics, the grand ideals and universal principles that are claimed to ‘found’ the community are always subject, to some extent, to the play of minor interests and struggles for advantage among competing parties. But it is also wrong to view the political dimension as simply reducible to a plaything of politics. Rather, the two are constantly interweaving and in rhetoric we find, simultaneously, efforts to foreground certain principles and close off others (the political) – and to do so without also undermining the ‘relations of force’, as the Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci (1971) called them, upon which such choices are built (politics). In this meeting point between the political and politics we find the power of persuasion.

In this book I conceive of rhetoric through the mediated distinction between politics and the political. Persuasion is both a mundane business *and* a channel of wider power relations; a process of coalition building *and* an effort to define higher principles. Too often these aspects are separated off from each other, with ‘empirical’ politics and day-to-day debate divided from the considerations of political philosophy and theory. But to understand how persuasion functions we need to see the two at work together. When it is considered at all, rhetoric is sometimes associated simply with one or the other: for example, with a scurrying for advantage (‘just rhetoric’) or with the great statements of famous orators (the ‘great speeches that changed the world’). The first invokes an image of politics without the political, while the second imagines the political without politics. If we are to have a better understanding of rhetorical persuasion, we need to see how each works with and affects the other.

Situating rhetoric in time and space

What exactly does the study of rhetoric comprise? Rhetoric is now an inclusive term for a wide range of themes related to communicating, arguing and persuading through symbols. A tremendous variety of scholarly books and journals are currently devoted to aspects of this expansive discipline. Its scope is simply too great for any one text to cover in sufficient depth. Rhetoric is studied in fields such as classics and history (see Habinek, 2005; Conley, 1990), literature (see Richards, 2008; Cockcroft and Cockcroft, 2005), law (see Brooks and Gewirtz, 1996; Goodrich, 1987), philosophy (Meyer, 1994; Grassi, 1980; 1983), cultural studies (see Brummett, 2011; Sellnow, 2010), organizational studies

(Hoffman and Ford, 2010), psychology (Billig, 1991, 1996) and even economics (see McCloskey, 1998). Traditionally concerned with written and spoken communication, the study of rhetoric now comprises visual forms, too (see Hill and Helmers, 2004; Kostelnick and Hassett, 2003). The approach adopted in this book is to introduce elements of rhetoric as they concern the study of politics and political theory. The main focus of the volume will therefore be on political discourses – that is, speech oriented towards relations of power and practices of citizenship.

In focusing on power and citizenship I do not mean to deny the political pertinence of the other areas of rhetorical investigation noted above. Rather, I seek to address a specific gap in political studies. Although rhetoric was originally an integral part of civic life in ancient Greece and Rome, the contemporary academic study of politics to a great extent neglects the role of speech and oratory (but see Skinner, 2002a: especially ch. 10; Garsten, 2006; Charteris-Black, 2005). There are many reasons for this, including the professionalization of politics, the proliferation of technologies such as television and the dominance in political studies of ‘scientific’ methods directed at measuring ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’ rather than interpreting meanings (see Nelson, 1998). Despite these developments, politics continues predominantly to be an activity of communicating and arguing in order to persuade audiences. Certainly we live in a highly mediated age where texts and images are consumed in far greater quantities than ever before, but that does not diminish the relevance of speech and persuasion so much as it qualifies and transforms it (see Jamieson, 1988). Of course, we cannot simply transplant ancient ideas and apply them to the present, but we can let these provoke us into thinking more about what distinguishes the present. At the core of this volume, then, is a view that politics remains a stubbornly practical business of communicating and persuading.

It may, of course, be objected that to give attention to rhetoric is to take seriously politicians and the things they say and do. That is true, but it need not be an objection. A common prejudice is that politicians are utterly self-interested, amoral actors who neither merit close scrutiny nor require theoretical analysis. While that may be so in many instances, nonetheless it is a prejudice in need of correction. Not all political actors are professional politicians involved in the institutionalized processes of government and party politics. The term ‘politician’ can refer to any individual or group that seeks to promote a political position, whether inside or outside formal institutions. Moreover, politicians (in the broad sense) are usually self-appointed agents of social change and innovation. Their words are often themselves deeds, or ways of acting. As Kari Palonen argues, to understand what they do, we need to ‘read politicians as theorists’ in their own right (see Palonen, 2005: 359). Politicians use ideas, theories and arguments in a ‘situated’ way to define the present circumstances, to forge coalitions, judge policies, contest government actions or advocate alternative ways of thinking and doing politics. Unlike most professional theorists, politicians inventively navigate the constraints and opportunities of politics to re-fashion ideas as legitimation for action. A rhetorical perspective on politics invites us to discard our prejudices

about politicians and to explore how political actors put theories and ideas to work (see also Wodak, 2011).

But why use rhetoric to examine what politicians do, rather than, for example, language, ideology or discourse? What is it that rhetoric offers that these more familiar categories do not? A preliminary answer is that *rhetoric permits an understanding of persuasive speech as a situated practice of argumentation*. To explore rhetoric is to consider how, at specific moments and locations, ideas are fashioned into arguments with a certain force and direction in order to win the assent of an audience. This definition underscores the dimensions of *time* and *space* as defining features of rhetorical persuasion, a point related to the idea of 'the political' as a horizon discussed earlier. Time refers to processes of simultaneity, change, speed and duration; space implies the co-presence of ideas and objects, relationships and distances between things. Speech aimed at persuasion is often a creative articulation of various times and spaces: the time and place of the speech occasion (the moment that gives rise to it and the event of its delivery), the time and space of the message (its sense of urgency, its ordering of priorities and so on) and the time and space of wider events into which it intervenes (the enduring effects it may have on politics in the future).

These temporal and spatial aspects interweave in rhetorical persuasion, helping to generate a sense of agency and purpose by mapping, via speech, a landscape of connections and hierarchies, certainties and risks, to shape judgements about how to proceed and to endow those judgements with affective force. In that respect, rhetorical persuasion is akin more to early cartography than to philosophy: it plots the terrain upon which we make our choices and alerts us to safety and danger ('Here be dragons!'), offering its audiences degrees of orientation in an otherwise unsteady world. Thus persuasion entails imaginatively recreating the context inside which a judgement is to be made about what to think or how to act.

A proper understanding of this jointly situated and resituating process undoubtedly overlaps with the study of language, ideology or discourse but, at the same time, it is not reducible to any one of these specialised discipline areas. Let me explain in more detail. In the past century, a broadly 'constructivist' idea of language came to inform a variety of philosophical and social scientific enterprises (see Taylor, 1985a: especially ch. 2; Rorty, 1989). Accordingly, language is the medium through which humans construct their cultural and material world and their sense of self. The grammars and vocabularies, concepts and categories of language shape what can be thought, perceived and said. To understand human beings, then, we must not only observe their behaviour but also interpret the meanings they employ to construct a world. Although it has ancient origins that long pre-date the so-called 'linguistic turn' in philosophy and the human sciences, continued interest in rhetoric today owes much to this conception of human action as linguistically mediated (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, 1998).

But we should not equate rhetoric exclusively with language. Not all language is rhetorical – that is, used for persuasive ends – nor is rhetoric strictly linguistic (it involves gestures and sounds as well as words). Moreover, there is a danger of missing the way it is related to politics if we hold too strongly to the notion of

language as fully constitutive of self and world. Rhetoric is important precisely because language regularly *fails* to constitute its object. It is because crises and dilemmas, conflicts and accidents occur that rhetoric is necessary. When established vocabularies cannot fully make sense of what has happened or how to proceed, then rhetoric helps to reassemble words and meanings in order for the world to make sense again. Of course, this work will of necessity involve language. But, as Sam Chambers argues, language is ‘not merely a problem *for* politics but a problem *of* politics’ (2003: 17): politics itself *is* the ongoing practice of reassembling self and world, given their repeated resistances to stable symbolization. Rhetoric weaves language and world together again and again because meaning is only partially stable, at best. Hence rhetoric is not identical to language but works through and around the gaps that prevent language from fully constituting a meaningful world.

We might say, then, that the spatial ordering of the world given in language is interrupted by time (or change). Some truths no longer hold; others don’t hold for everybody or in all instances. That is why rhetoric is preoccupied with arguments. Arguments activate a preferred view of the relationship between symbols and the world, perhaps a hierarchy of values or an order of thinking, strengthening some connections and weakening others in order to reinforce or change a judgement where the durability of truth is in doubt. In rhetoric, ideas are given force and direction – that is, a sense of weight and purpose – within the work of an argument. It is, to follow J.L. Austin’s famous title, a way of doing things *with* words (see Austin, 1962). But it is always a tentative and temporary kind of doing, with no guarantee that words can permanently hold down the meanings they are given (see Derrida, 1988).

If arguments are central to rhetoric, then why not look at political ideology? Ideology is a term used to describe an enduring constellation of associated concepts, values and arguments that orient political actors towards distinct programmes of government and social interests (see Freedon, 1996). This spatial arrangement of connecting concepts and making associations between them is typically recognized as partial in as much as it privileges some ideas at the expense of others, treating particular values as incontestable and universal while diminishing or contesting others. Ideologies such as socialism or ecologism are organized belief systems that may overlap in various aspects, but remain distinct in so far as they embody a selective preference for some principles or values, such as social and economic equality or environmental protection. Ideology therefore shares the argumentative orientation of rhetoric.

If there is undoubtedly a parallel between rhetoric and ideology, in its common usage the latter terms tend to direct us to established *systems* of ideas and arguments (liberalism, fascism and so on) and not to the practice of assembling them through forms of address to specific audiences. Rhetoric certainly is ideological in so far as it draws upon and adds to ideological systems but, again, it is not reducible to these (see Weiler, 1993). Sometimes speech and argument re-fashion ideologies in new ways, selecting elements that are thought to ‘belong’ to opposed systems and combining them in novel forms. On occasion there is no obvious

ideological home at all for an argument; it may place itself simultaneously in a variety of ideological categories, or none at all (see Bastow and Martin, 2003). Nevertheless, ideology remains an important resource for the study of rhetoric in as much as arguments draw upon and rework enduring ideological configurations, which comprise already established scripts (see Finlayson, 2012).

What, then, of discourse? This term has become ubiquitous in recent social and political investigation, particularly in the fields of linguistics (especially critical discourse analysis; see Fairclough, 1993; Wodak, 2011) and social theory (see Howarth, 2000). Instead of referring us to stable systems of language or arguments, discourse usually places our focus on dynamic, often temporally changeable meanings that shape social practices and that are actively transformed across time and space. The emphasis on making meaning lends discourse a more fluid, inventive character than ideology. Like ideologies, discourses certainly have structure. But the term gives primacy to the malleability of that structure as it is reproduced in different contexts.

In that respect, discourse invokes the situated and 'at-work' character of rhetorical speech as a process of assembling ideas at specific moments. Discourse exceeds the closed system of ideas often associated with political ideology. In the work of thinkers such as Foucault, the term also has an ontological inflection. That is, it refers to ways in which social identity (the 'being' of human subjects, or subjectivity, rather than just their political values or interests) is itself determined through a combination of ideas and practices embedded in claims to knowledge and authority (see Foucault, 1980: ch. 6; 1972). As Foucault understood them, discourses are infused with power, conceived as a productive capacity, in that they create positions from which to speak. This is not power conceived as a force imposed on individuals from outside. Rather, it is a 'fluid' power by which selfhood is cultivated, perhaps even in resistance to dominant norms (see Phillips, 2006). Discourses 'recruit' (rather than trap) subjects, allocating them roles and shaping them in unconscious ways that often evade scrutiny. For example, discourses of race and gender shape the self-perception of subjects: the ways they are viewed by others, how they use their bodies and what they can properly say and feel about them. If ideology gives us scripts to argue from, then discourses position us on the stage, making us visible (or not) and authorizing us to speak (or not).

Yet the breadth of discourse (for instance of race, gender or nationhood) gives it a scope that extends beyond the situated encounters usually analysed by rhetoricians. Rhetoric is, undoubtedly, a form of discourse in that it disseminates meanings that shape experience and recruit subjects. But one key virtue of rhetorical study is its concentration on speech and argument in specific, situated encounters. Much discourse theory makes use of the terminology of rhetoric to talk about social groups and identities, but often at high levels of abstraction that refer back to complex systems of thought (see Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis, 2000; Howarth and Torfing, 2004). It might be helpful, then, to regard rhetoric as a means to focus on discourses in their operation at the level of particular events, texts and encounters. If discourses organize social practices (that is, inscribe meanings on the activities

that subjects undertake), rhetorical analysis explores the moments at which discursive ‘regimes’ are introduced and reproduced through argument. In that way, rhetorical study permits analysis of concrete interventions that aspire to become effective, perhaps dominant discourses. Like ideology, then, we can say that discourse is refracted through rhetoric, but it is not its primary concern. Rhetorical practices may introduce and, eventually, help to establish, extend or transform a discourse. But *as* rhetoric, its eventual outcome is still to be determined.

So if rhetorical study overlaps with the related concerns of language, ideology and discourse, it is nonetheless distinctive because it mobilizes aspects of all three in the generation of persuasive speech. Rhetoric describes the construction of meanings through language, often by drawing upon ideological associations to define that meaning in selective ways and discursively constructing the subjects who are to act through it. But these are achieved through *concrete* modes of address and argumentation, which are typically the concern of rhetorical enquiry. There is not a hard-and-fast distinction to be made between rhetoric and these other areas of analysis, so we should not see them as mutually exclusive. But, as we shall see later in the book, rhetorical study invites us to dwell on language, ideology or discourse as they are situated at intersections of time and space.

Chapter outline

The book is arranged in such a way as to introduce various aspects of rhetoric across a broad spectrum of issues. It does so in a series of steps: in Chapters 2 and 3 I discuss the relationship of rhetoric to political theory; in Chapters 4 and 5 I survey the classifications and techniques of rhetorical instruction; in Chapter 6 I reflect on how these techniques can be mobilized to analyse political strategies; and in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 I consider aspects of rhetoric in distinct domains where persuasive discourse is politically salient: namely democracy, the media and gender. Overall, I argue a number of things: rhetoric is central to a theoretical understanding of politics; the categories of rhetoric inherited from ancient writers remain illuminating and useful; and these categories can be supplemented with the help of contemporary theory to understand how judgements in politics are produced politically.

Let me now sketch the content of each chapter in turn. In Chapter 2 I explore the troubled relationship of rhetoric and political theory. Many classical thinkers believed rhetorical speech and its instruction to be central to the life of political association. This was the view promoted by Aristotle and later advocates of the republican form of government. Nonetheless, since then, political theory has tended to disparage rhetoric as a menace and even a threat to the maintenance of social order and authority. Thinkers such as Plato initiated this view by counterposing rhetoric to philosophical ‘truth’. Modern political thinkers, such as Hobbes and Rousseau – although they reject Plato’s notion of rational truth – retain the idea that rhetoric threatens political order and needs to be restrained.

Chapter 3 continues the examination of the status of rhetoric by focusing on its role as a tool of the citizen. I begin by noting the substantial difference

between citizenship in the ancient and modern worlds. The classical advocates of republican politics regarded speaking and participating in public life as central elements of citizenship. But modern citizens are encouraged to look to private not public life as the source of fulfilment and rhetoric is no longer an explicit component of citizenship. Nonetheless, further reflection on the nature of modern societies – particularly the separation of a political authority from the rest of society – suggests how rhetorical persuasion remains important as a means of democratic representation.

Chapters 2 and 3 have set up a framework for thinking about rhetoric politically, underscoring the way in which persuasive speech is regarded as a threat to social order but also a means to contest and debate its parameters. The tension between these positions is evident in the way rhetorical strategies work today. Before we consider that further, however, we need to explore the content of rhetorical instruction itself. In Chapter 4 I explore the first two of the five classical ‘canons’ of rhetoric: the *discovery* of argument and the *arrangement* of the parts of speech. In Chapter 5 I discuss aspects of *style* and *delivery* (missing out the fifth canon, *memory*). These chapters provide a descriptive overview of the basic content of rhetorical advice inherited from classical times.

In Chapter 6 I consider how we can employ the techniques and classifications of the rhetorical tradition to analyse political action. Against the once dominant tradition of positivism in political science, I align rhetoric with ‘interpretive’ approaches that seek to understand behaviour by reference to the ideas and language of actors themselves. More than that, however, I follow others who claim rhetoric has a distinctive approach to ideas: namely, in the form of arguments. Political arguments never simply reflect stable cognitive frames by which actors see the world but, rather, are dynamic interventions that give force and direction to ideas. Rhetorical political analysis, then, is a way of examining how actors ‘appropriate’ situations by defining the issues at stake and orienting others in a given context.

In Chapter 7 I discuss the value of rhetoric for democratic theory today. Recent efforts to revive participation in democracy underscore active deliberation by citizens. But this has come with a strong critique of what are regarded as the disruptive effects of rhetoric, particularly the use of emotional appeals. Instead, so-called ‘deliberative democrats’ foreground the rational – and purportedly impartial – dimensions of communication. I discuss the difficulties and dangers of eliminating passions from persuasion and, with regard to developments in the disciplines of neuroscience and psychoanalysis, set out an alternative perspective that gives greater room to ‘affective rhetorical strategies’ to negotiate politics and the political.

The theme of Chapter 8 is the influence of mass media on political rhetoric. In many ways, media inherit the controversial status that rhetoric once held – simultaneously hailed as the channel of free speech yet frequently loathed as the obstacle to informed communication. To explore this ambivalence, the chapter identifies the contest over the meaning and limits of the ‘public’ as integral to communicative strategies undertaken in a mediated public domain.

Media platforms are never simply a neutral resource to communicate political messages; they themselves shape messages by appropriating situations according to selective values and nurturing their audiences' ongoing expectations. In this sense, media themselves undertake a rhetorical function. As we shall see, that enables certain rhetorical strategies over others and shapes public discourse in distinctive, often rather narrow, ways.

Finally, in Chapter 9 I discuss the gendered character of rhetoric. Classical ideas about speech and persuasion sometimes compared it to a form of struggle in which a heroic figure wrestled with an audience in order to win the 'war of words'. Such an outlook continues in modern politics where, as feminists have struggled tirelessly to lay bare, men and their speaking conventions dominate debating chambers. Political rhetoric, as we shall see, is gendered through and through, both in the way in which it is embodied in the person of a speaker and in how the wider 'body politic' is figuratively imagined. Yet a gender perspective also highlights the instability of the categories defining sexual identity, and thus also the ambivalent gendering of speech for the purposes of persuasion. Here I use the example of rhetoric about the nation to explore the peculiar ways that gender enters into political speech.

Summary

Persuasion, I have argued, is central to politics. But understanding persuasion lifts the veil on a practice that is more than just a set of techniques for communication. Rhetoric draws us towards the power relations, the contests over the parameters of space and time and the controversies that underlie and occasionally disrupt routine politics. Far from being concerned exclusively with a superficial level of speech, analysing rhetoric invites us to grasp the deeper political dimension that shapes how individuals relate to each other, what they can say, and how.