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The concept of *doxa* in the European reinvention of rhetoric

The Birth of rhetorical theory in ancient Greece has been described as founded on a conflict between *doxa* and *episteme*, between rhetorical knowledge – opinion – and philosophical knowledge – truth.

In this presentation I will describe how the concept of *doxa* has been used by Martin Heidegger, Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu to formulate a view on knowledge – and also how these views have been further developed by later and more explicitly rhetorical thinkers such as Robert Hariman, Ruth Amossy and Mats Rosengren.

The ambition is not to deepen the understanding of any one of these highly individual thinkers – but to formulate the core of their views and treat them as being in a conceptual discussion with each other even when that historically was not the case. Through this process I hope to formulate an understanding of different alignments of the concept of *doxa* – and present a modern discussion on rhetoric and knowledge founded on a tradition of European continental philosophy.

Martin Heidegger

The argument on *doxa* in Heidegger is closely related to his search for the meaning of Being; in that context *doxa* is given a central role in explaining the human position. Heidegger's understanding of *doxa* has been linked to Husserl, but the explicit historical reference is to a pre-Socratic understanding of the concept. Heidegger does not ally himself with the early rhetorical theorists, but describes Plato and the sophists as equally to blame for the diminishing of *doxa* to mere opinion.

For Heidegger beings should not be understood as objects in themselves – instead Being lies in the aspects that are shown and apprehended. Truth (or *Aletheia*) for Heidegger is not correspondence between the spoken word and a reality – instead truth is the foundational happening when beings appear – when they come into Being by stepping out of concealment.

The concept of *doxa* for Heidegger means both the aspect that someone shows and the respect in which someone stands in the view of others. It is both “Aussehen” and “Ansehen”. *Doxa* is also related to more negatively connoted meanings, such as mere seeming or sheer opinion. This negative view is based on an idea about a false or distorted showing of aspects and a false apprehension of these aspects.

Heidegger states that *doxa* is false because it hides its mechanisms and presents itself as apparent. Heidegger also describes *doxa* and *aletheia* as different types of *logos*, where *logos* is not rational thinking but a combination of “discourse” and the process of “gathering” and “structuring”.

Aletheia is when the process of gathering also becomes the process of revealing. *Doxa* on the other hand is understood as the discourse that conceals and covers-up Being. Heidegger states that the revealing discourse must turn away from all mere recitation. *Doxa* is the mindless repetition of that which is already accepted while *aletheia* is a creative language that reveals the essence of Being.

It is clear that Heidegger despises both the blind fanatic of epistemic truth and the ignorant masses who like dogs just accept what is told to them. The ideal human position for Heidegger is the faculty to make decisions regarding beings based on awareness of the processes of concealment and unconcealment.

The writings of Heidegger presents a highly interesting setting for a philosophical conversation on *doxa*. From a rhetorical perspective his view lacks an idea of the active rhetor – for Heidegger the human position is primarily a hermeneutic position. His writings on *doxa* also lack an explicit theory of the socialization of knowledge. Some aspects imply an awareness of such an aspect of being, and he could be interpreted as a socially oriented thinker, but it's far from the explicit emphasis on the social situation that characterize much of modern and ancient rhetorical theory.

Robert Hariman

The starting point for Robert Hariman in his discussion on *doxa* is completely different from that of Heidegger. Hariman writes from within an American field of rhetorical studies, and his article on *doxa* should be understood as a part of the lively discussion in that field on the relevance of rhetoric and on the relation between rhetoric and knowledge.

Hariman imports – but also transforms – Heidegger's perspective on *doxa*. He agrees with Heidegger that *doxa* is characterized by the concealing of its own mechanisms and that *aletheia* is a discourse that reveals these mechanisms – but the position of the critic described by Hariman is very different from the questioning Dasein described by Heidegger.

The main difference between their theories of *doxa* is the emphasis and lack of emphasis on the social aspects of knowledge. Heidegger does not formulate a sociology of *doxa*, but

presents Dasein as a hermeneutic position. Hariman, in contrast, emphasize *doxa* as social and as related to power. Where Heidegger discusses how meaning is created through structuring Hariman specifies that this structuring process works through attributions of status, and specifically by a normative structuring related to the positions of center and margin that according to Hariman exist in every society.

This interpretation of the Heideggerian idea of creating meaning by gathering and structuring makes the approach of Hariman an interesting platform for the practice of rhetorical criticism, but it also makes it very different from the thought of Heidegger. When Hariman describes *doxa* as “intersubjective” this implies that the social arena is the constitutive field, but Heidegger’s thinking could instead be interpreted as focused on the relationship between a human Dasein and other beings that are not necessarily human or at all capable of apprehension.

Harriman’s *doxa* theory could be described as a rhetorical and sociological shift in relation to Heidegger. Hariman proposes that a rhetorical theory focused on status and power could be used to situate claims on being in social discourse. He also mentions the constitutive force of rhetoric – the possibility of going beyond hermeneutic interpretation and doing real work on *doxa* through reclassification.

Roland Barthes

Barthes uses the word *doxa*, but the explicit historical reference is to the Aristotelian concept of *endoxa*. The central move in Barthes’ take on *doxa* is to adapt the Aristotelian concept and use it to understand contemporary mass culture. This use of the term is influenced by Flaubert’s critic of bourgeois stupidity and a critic of ideology and mass communication influenced by Marx.

From classical rhetoric Barthes picks the idea of *doxa* as “public opinion”, “the probable” and “ideas shared by the majority”. *Doxa* is both the starting point of rhetorical argumentation and the judge who decides its effectiveness. “The probable” in Barthes interpretation is not at all concerned with statistical probability, but rather with widespread acceptability. It has been noted that Barthes description of *doxa* and his dichotomy between opinion and knowledge is more close to Plato’s view – than the views of Aristotle which he claims to discuss. The Platonian understanding of *doxa* makes for an easier fit with modern mass culture – which, according to Barthes, is mainly concerned with stereotypes and widespread beliefs.

Barthes describes modern mass communication as a corrupted and diffuse version of ancient rhetoric. These two practices of language belong to different eras but they are linked together by their focus on *doxa*. Barthes is fascinated by rhetoric, but he is in search of something new – a linguistic practice that could replace rhetorical language and a theory that could replace rhetorical theory.

Central to his early writings is the close connection between language and *doxa*. *Doxa* is seen as a parasite on language, a kind of viral being that is spread through the practice of symbolic communication. The focus of Barthes is not on the author behind the rhetoric – rather he tends to either describe language as the active force producing *doxa* –or *doxa* as the power, enforcing itself on language and individuals.

In his autobiography it becomes clear that Barthes views the struggle with *doxa* as a personal struggle – an individual fight against both the stupidity that lurks within himself and the cultural myths that enforce themselves on him through mass culture. The early Barthes put's the focus on dispelling rhetoric – the later Barthes instead focus on liberating the reader by making reading a play with meaning rather than a passive accepting of the dominant rhetoric.

In relation to Heidegger, Barthes share the negative assessment of *doxa* - and especially the understanding of it as both false and as mindless repetition. Their ideal of a liberating critical position is formulated differently but it is built on the same negative judgment on those who passively accept the *doxa* as presented.

Ruth Amossy

Ruth Amossy describes two traditions of doxic thinking within French thought. The first tradition – where Barthes is a main figure, is a tradition of criticism in the footsteps of Plato. The second tradition constitute a constructive turn – where *doxa* is not condemned as stupid or manipulative but neutrally described as a fundamental part of human language. Amossy proposes that we should go back to the thinkers of the first tradition and explore how we could make use of their theories in a constructive way.

In relation to Barthes approach Amossy's view on *doxa* constitutes a shift in several aspects. The valuation shifts from negative – to neutral or even positive. *Doxa* is described as a prerequisite for intersubjectivity and a source for communicative effectiveness. This shift also changes the nature of academic work on *doxa* – from a politically driven critique to a scientifically and linguistically oriented analysis of discourse.

Barthes has a focus on "the text", which is kept by Amossy, but the individual active speaker gets a stronger position within her thought. *Doxa* becomes a tool that can be used in discourse.

The structuralist focus on ideology as a system from the early Barthes is abandoned by Amossy. Instead she allies herself with the later writings of Barthes, where he finds *doxa* in the fragments and refuse to put them in an integrated whole.

Amossy dismisses the ontological question on the essence of *doxa* and poses the pragmatic question on how to do things with *doxa*. Her point is that to understand *doxa* we must study how it's used in language – because it exists through language.

Pierre Bourdieu

In the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu the concept of *doxa* seems to include both a certain kind of knowledge and the order that produces this knowledge. *Doxa* is the experience where the natural and the social world appears as self-evident, this happens through misrecognition of the limits of cognition. *Doxa*, according to Bourdieu, is a mechanism of concealment that tends to conserve the pre-existing power structure. *Doxa* is the universe of the truly undiscussed and undisputed; a realm that has to be understood in contrast to the realm of argumentation.

Put in relation to Barthes and Amossy Bourdieu shifts focus from the structure of language to the power of social relations. For Bourdieu a mere semiotics is not enough, instead we have to study the social conditions for the production and reception of messages. The power does not lie within language, but rather in the extra-linguistic mechanisms, structures and resources that empowers language.

Both Barthes and Amossy tend to see *doxa* as what is not said explicitly, but Bourdieu takes this a step further and claims that *doxa* shouldn't be understood as representation (or false representation) at all. The power of *doxa*, according to Bourdieu, lies within the accepted systems and mechanisms; it is the undiscussed which often is transferred directly through bodies like the practical knowledge of the worker. Bourdieu describes it with an emphasis on the negative as "bodily submission, unconscious submission, which may indicate a lot of internalized tension, a lot of bodily suffering".

Both Bourdieu and Amossy allies themselves with Austin in focusing on speech as acts rather than on language as an object, but where Amossy seem to uphold the idea of an active rhetor *using* language to achieve certain goals –Bourdieu questions the individual subject and describes our dispositions to act in certain ways as constituted by a social tradition. To follow Bourdieu in thinking about language and *doxa* is to consider the extra-linguistic social conditions and power structures – and to direct our gaze toward all that which is taken for granted – that which is never heard or said.

Bourdieu is critical of the dichotomy, which can be found in a Marxist tradition, between those who are aware and those who are not. The social world does not, according to him, revolve around the conscious/unconscious axis, but instead work through practices and mechanisms.

The thinking of Bourdieu is at the same time closely related to all of the others and completely different. Perhaps its most problematic aspect for this comparative study is that Bourdieu uses the term *doxa* with a strict meaning that does not put the distinctions along the same lines as any of the others thinkers. The thinking of Bourdieu could function as a dialogue partner for any of the other thinkers, but to describe the other approaches with the terminology of Bourdieu *doxa* as has to be combined with other terms.

Mats Rosengren

The starting point for Mats Rosengren is a deconstruction of the dichotomy between *doxa* and *episteme*. His main idea, linked to Protagoras *homo mensura*-statement, is that all knowledge is doxic – because all knowledge is human. Rosengren states that *logos*, as both language and thought, is the tool that humans use when measuring the world. This move sidesteps the definition of the human being, but still emphasize that humans are social beings and that our identities, worlds and practices as thinking and speaking beings are always overlapping and changing.

Rosengren's project is to formulate a theory of knowledge based on *doxa* rather than *episteme*. For him Rhetoric becomes a tool that can be used to study *doxa*, but not just from the position of the observer, it's a tool to actively work on *doxa* through displacements, adjustments and refigurations. *Doxa* is understood as in constant change and constant migration.

The concept of *doxa* in the writings of Rosengren is a wide concept; it includes both the conscious opinions which are expressed through language and the unformulated fields of knowledge that we take for granted.

He emphasizes the importance of language in structuring our sensations and perceptions and our very ability to perceive talk and think; but he also states that *doxa* is not only discursive, but includes all our abilities. As well as linguistically structured knowledge it includes emotional values and predispositions to act in certain ways in relation to different symbols and situations. *Doxa* also, according to Rosengren, includes the individual, social, historical and discursive situation and cannot be understood separate from power structures.

Rosengren combines a linguistic understanding of *doxa*, as the one Amossy makes, with the extra-linguistic aspects described by Bourdieu – and connects this to a philosophical discussion on what it means to be in the world.

When it comes to the possibility for human strategic action Rosengren could be described as being in the middle ground between the idea of an active rhetor and the emphasis on the coercive force of tradition and social conditions. He stresses the social conditioning, but describes a possibility to makes choices and to create alternative ways of acting from this position formed by the past.

To study *doxa* in the spirit of Rosengren is not just to study linguistics but to study the human position as a social and physical being placed in a world of traditions and structures – and to recognize that humans can create meaning and act through other means than the formulation of words.

Conclusions

We have just scratched the surface of this discussion on *doxa*, but I hope to have shown that this kind of comparative study reveals important characteristics of the modern European reinvention of rhetoric.

It shows that modern rhetorical theory is a reformulation of a pluralistic rhetorical heritage for contemporary purposes within existing traditions of academic thought.

This comparative approach also put the limelight on important aspects and conflicts that lie within the idea of a modern understanding of rhetorical knowledge.

It raises questions such as:

- Is the human position socially determined or open to political activity?
- Is rhetorical knowledge something positive or negative?
- Should modern rhetorical theory focus on language and text – or include a broad understanding of what it is to be human – picked up from sociology and philosophy?
- Should the scholar of rhetorical studies be an interpreter and revealer of rhetoric or an active *rhetor* transforming our vocabulary and *doxa*?

It is clear that the different thinkers in our study reach for the concept from different positions and with different purposes – but we could still find common threads of meaning.

Like the idea of *doxa* as widespread beliefs, as something repeated, as concealment and as a knowledge constituted by our positioning as social beings – rather than by correspondence to a reality.

These common threads of meaning exemplify one of the beauties of modern rhetorical studies – that disparate and highly creative thinkers still can be united in a common field since their position as reformulators of a pluralistic rhetorical heritage unites them and makes them suitable for comparison.

When looking at these six thinkers we can also notice a general shift from the first generation to the second generation of thinkers. From Heidegger to Hariman, from Barthes to Amossy and from Bourdieu to Rosengren. This shift constitutes a rhetorical turn in the way that the later generation of thinkers has a more positive view on *doxa* and lays more emphasis on the active *rhetor* than their forerunners do. This shift confirms Amossy's idea of a constructive turn on the study of *doxa* – even though the thinkers studied in our study, with the exception of Barthes, is not included in her study.

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