

Rhetoric of reasons and emotions in times of crisis

Retoryka racji i emocji w czasach kryzysu

9 (3) 2022 ISSUE EDITORS: MARIA ZAŁĘSKA, EWA MODRZEJEWSKA

RECENZJA / REVIEW

MARIA ZAŁĘSKA

UNIwersytet Warszawski

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2973-0173>

m.zaleska@uw.edu.pl

Recenzja/Review: Alessandro Prato (2021) *Retorica e comunicazione persuasiva. Le forme della manipolazione*. Pisa, Edizioni ETS.

License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 international (CC BY 4.0).
The content of the license is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

MARIA ZAŁĘSKA

UNIwersytet Warszawski

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2973-0173>

m.zaleska@uw.edu.pl

Recenzja/Review: Alessandro Prato (2021) *Retorica e comunicazione persuasiva.* *Le forme della manipolazione.* Pisa, Edizioni ETS.

The book *Rhetorica e comunicazione persuasiva. Le forme della manipolazione* (“Rhetoric and persuasive communication. The forms of manipulation”) is included in the publishing series *SEMEIA – I segni, le lingue, la storia*, which releases research studies on communication, semiotics and culture. The volume is divided into four chapters, dealing with various aspects of rhetoric.

The book starts with a chapter entitled “Toward an Ethics of Communication” (*Per un’etica della comunicazione*), in which the formal quality of arguments is considered in terms of their ethical value, affecting the quality of democracy. The author argues that since the arguments in public discourse directly affect citizens’ beliefs and actions, disinformation and fallacious argumentation actually limit citizens’ rights to make decisions in their best interest. Manipulation phenomena considered in the book include argumentative fallacies, misleading imagery, semantic abuse or excessive pathos. In the text, sometimes the word “manipulation” (*manipolazione*) is accompanied by adjectives such as “bad” (*cattiva*), “fraudulent” (*ingannevole*), “dishonest” (*disonesta*), as if good, reliable and honest manipulation were possible at all. The author discusses what he calls the hermeneutic and educational function of rhetoric: it provides a conceptual map that allows anyone to navigate the intricacies of persuasive communication.

The historical overview of the various typologies of fallacies and their definitions is very useful. The author cites not only ancient thinkers (mainly Aristotle), but also scholars less associated with rhetoric *sensu stricto*, such as Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, authors of *La Logique ou l’Art De Penser* (1662) from Port Royal, or Locke and his *Essay on human understanding* (1690). Most attention, however, is paid to Jeremy Bentham’s model of fallacies (*Book of fallacies* 1824). The author also discusses the ideas of theorists and practitioners dealing with issues of persuasive influence on the masses (Walter Lippmann, Edward Bernays, Noam Chomsky). The chapter ends with an analysis of propaganda, especially

the manipulative use of rhetorical pathos (fear, hatred, rage, pride, sense of belonging) to mobilize the audience.

In the second chapter, entitled “The Power of Words” (*Il potere delle parole*), the author focuses on various rhetorically relevant issues of semantics. The first part of the chapter deals with the “rhetoric of dissimulation”, i.e. the concealment of true intentions under the guise of slyly selected words. The manipulative power of words can be realized, among other things, through uses of euphemism to name objects or phenomena (such as *war*, *torture*, *victims*) inconvenient to the authorities or through semantic vagueness that diverts attention from what is relevant. The author also problematizes such seemingly positive phenomena as simplicity of expression: leading to oversimplifications, it reveals to be a handy means of manipulation. Such an apparently user-friendly newspeak, disseminated in the media, creates false consciousness in citizens. The author stresses that social power, regardless of manifestation, exists only in communication; therefore, sensitivity to lexical choices is essential. The second part of the chapter deals with the power of words in the context of creativity. Here the author evokes not only ancient authors, such as Aristotle, but he takes into account also the contributions of Italian thinkers (such as Giambattista Vico), and in particular the linguistic philosophy of a famous Italian poet, Giacomo Leopardi. The third part of the chapter focuses on the symbolic value of words, illustrated through concepts that are important in culture (not only Italian), such as food (*cibo*) or coffee (*caffè*). Using this “food rhetoric” (*retorica alimentare*) as an example, the author points to the mechanisms of meaning generation and correspondencies between concrete and symbolic semantic nuances of words.

The third chapter, titled “Word and image” (*La parola e l'immagine*), is devoted entirely to two rhetorical figures for rendering visual perception through verbalization. The first is hypotyposis (also known as “evidentia”), which consists of a vivid, possibly direct and engaging representation of an object or situation. The second one is ekphrasis, i.e. verbally evoking the impression of a visual stimulus (e.g., an object or scene). Resorting to many examples, the author comments on the power of images and the power of words able to generate images.

Chapter four – “The status of rhetoric” (*Lo statuto della retorica*) – explores first of all the negative connotation of the word ‘rhetoric’. The author reviews various arguments that have been formulated throughout history (voiced, for example, by Plato, Locke, D’Alembert) to justify the thesis that rhetoric is neither a discipline of knowledge nor even a methodical practice based on rational theory. In this part of the volume, the author discusses also the positive and negative aspects of the concept of relativism, so important in the sophists’ idea of rhetorical communication (especially in Gorgias).

In the second part of the chapter the author explores the relationship between rhetoric and anthropology. Rhetoric, treated as a full-fledged scholarly discipline, is described by the author as convergent with anthropology. First, both disciplines recognize orality as the default basic paradigm of communication. Second, both focus on the effectiveness of communication: rhetoric is concerned with the effectiveness of persuasion, while anthropology with the effectiveness of such activities as magic, for example. Third, research in both disciplines is deeply concerned with the context of communication and the interpersonal relationships that co-produce verbalized content.

The missing final chapter would have lent coherence to the entire volume, offering general conclusions and synthesizing the author's own views on persuasive communication in its different positive and negative realizations. The subtitle of the book suggests that forms of manipulation are the dominant issue, while they are actually addressed mainly in the first and partly in the second chapter. The remaining chapters explore communication rather from the literary perspective, presenting rhetoric as a manifestation of human creativity: imagination (the study of metaphor), stylistic talent (the research on hypotyposis and ekphrasis) and associative thinking (the reflection on symbolic meanings).

The volume shows both the universality of rhetoric and the linguaculturally conditioned sensitivity of the researcher. The author demonstrates scholarly erudition, expertly referring both to classics (e.g. Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian) and to contemporary scholars representing various research trends (such as Arendt, Chomsky, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, van Eemeren). The numerous references to contributions by Italian intellectuals, writers, linguists, and rhetoricians (Beccaria, Bonfiglioli, Boniolo, Cattani, D'Agostini, Eco, Ellero, Genovesi, Leopardi, Lombardi Vallauri, Marmo, Piazza, Raimondi, Rigotti, Vico, to name just a few) prove how multiform and sophisticated the disciplinary universe of Italian rhetoric is. Anyone who is fortunate enough to speak Italian will certainly take valuable insights from reading Alessandro Prato's book.