

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - The Rhetoric Of Emotions In Political Argumentation



The topic of this paper is emotions in election campaigns, and the following questions will be raised:

1. How do political scientists describe the present political situation?
2. What kinds of emotions occur in political argumentation, more precisely in election campaign discourses, and how are they displayed?

3. How are emotions in argumentation perceived?

3. Finally, in the presented case study, can the chairman of the Christian Democratic Party be accused for being fallacious?

1. The present political situation in western democracies

Political scientists describe the present political situation in following terms: Both inside and outside the European Union, party-political support and participation in political elections decrease. Politics is complicated and difficult to understand. Ideologies are proclaimed dead, and political alternatives appear indistinct (Engelstad 2006). However, large numbers of people are politically engaged, and they even participate with passion. There are frequent examples in the media of political leaders who brake off negotiations, who interrupt debates, who march under banners of identity and faith, and these images frighten political thinkers of today (Waltzer 2004). In other words, the political situation and its prospects are characterised in negative and pessimistic terms, and the description is given in times when it is urgent to be concerned about democracy and participation in democratic processes, at least on the background of the development of fundamental regimes and the growth of right-wing populism.

Before I go on to describe emotions in election campaign discourses, I will dwell on the political situation of today and ask: How do political philosophers meet the present situation? What are they concerned about? Some of them come up with interesting alternatives to standard theories, and among them Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau and Micheal Waltzer have received great interest, and in Norway particularly Mouffe (Engelstad 2006 and Moe 2006). Central in Mouffe's theory

about democracy, is her argumentation against an exaggerated conception of rationality which is fundamental in modern thinking about democracy, and in particular how it is represented by Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. While Habermas believes it is possible to reach agreement from discussions and to take neutral standpoints in that process, Rawls presupposes that human beings are fully rational and capable to decide what a good society is, independent of their knowledge, education and experience, even in an unskilled condition. Her argument is that both Habermas and Rawls disregard tensions in liberal democracies by assuming that it is possible to reach full agreement, and by claiming that rational solutions to fundamental political problems are possible (Mouffe 2000).

Pluralism is a starting point in Mouffe's thinking. A "people" is not a unified, undifferentiated mass, even when they agree on something. In every agreement, i.e. in every consensus, there must be disagreement, i.e. there must be exclusion. A crucial question for democratic politics is to establish a pluralism that acknowledges differences of opinion, and to deal with the realities of pluralism. Secondly, both Mouffe and Waltzer are concerned about the opposition between the contextualist approach as it is represented by Wittgenstein and the universalist and rationalist approach as it is represented by Habermas and Rawls. They reject that "context-independent" judgements can be made, and argue that it is important for the theorist to assume fully his status as a member of a particular community (Mouffe 2000).

Democratic politics is inherently conflictual in nature, and therefore Mouffe welcomes an agonistic discussion (Moe 2005:160). Agonistic discussion is seen in opposition to antagonism. An agonistic model of democracy presupposes that conflicts in a democracy neither can nor should be eliminated. Within democratic politics, it is required that "the others" never are regarded as enemies, but as antagonists whose ideas should be attacked, while their right to defend their ideas never should be questioned or attacked.

According to Mouffe, conflicts must never develop into antagonism, which is equivalent with a fight between enemies. Instead it is important to find ways that conflicts can develop into agonism, which is a fight between adversaries. The confrontation between adversaries is the core in an agonistic fight, which again is the condition for a living democracy, according to Mouffe. Important for Mouffe is her vision of democracy as a never ending struggle between antagonists that accept each other as antagonists. They agree to disagree, and thus they agree on

the framework of democracy. Mouffe defines democracy as follows, and she says: I use the concept of agonistic pluralism to present a new way to think about democracy which is different from the traditional liberal conception of democracy as a negotiation among interests and is also different to the model which is currently being developed by people like Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. While they have many differences, Rawls and Habermas have in common the idea that the aim of the democratic society is the creation of a consensus, and that consensus is possible if people are only able to leave aside their particular interests and think as rational beings. However, while we desire an end to conflict, if we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to provide an arena where differences can be confronted (Mouffe 2000).

Mouffe is welcoming emotions and passion in politics. She is not referring to an individual passion, rather to the emotional dimension in the creation of collective identities. The framework of present, dominating models are too rational and too individual, and consequently they cannot meet the needs in democratic politics. Both Laclau and Mouffe back this pluralism, but this does not mean that they necessarily back extreme political viewpoints. These are considered to be dangerous to democracy and to pluralism. They do not believe that consensual politics is best for a democracy; rather they believe that each set of ideas could be forced against its rival.

Media plays an important role in politics, and in recent time media is recognised as an independent actor, with great influence on election campaigns. However, mediated political discourse can be characterised as highly adversarial and emotional, a fact that contributes to create a negative image of the media's role in democratic processes. Mouffe is concerned about the media's role in politics, and takes the position that media does not obstruct the progress of democracy, a position that is often taken by politicians, media researchers and "people" in general. Media cannot be conceived as one thing, one unit, she claims, but media exists of alternative media channels, and some of these give voice to opinions which are not allowed to be uttered by the greater media actors. Media mirrors society in the way that if the society is not progressive enough, media cannot be it either, according to Mouffe. As a conclusion to this point, one can say that it is important to give a more nuanced picture of media's role, especially in election campaigns.

2. *Emotions in political argumentation*

The role of emotions in politics and the role of media in politics are constantly discussed among persons interested both in politics and in the media. Political journalists welcome emotions in politics by referring to political philosopher Michael Waltzer. The core message of his book *Politics and Passion* (2004) is that emotions and a high temperature mobilise people to participate in politics. Reference is also made to political philosopher Chantal Mouffe who claims that politics is disagreement and opposing views, politics is conflicts, and politics is emotions (Mouffe 2005).

Many of the ideas put forward by Mouffe and by Waltzer are central for argumentation theorists and for researchers in political communication. She is concerned about the ideas claimed by many sociologists, one of these ideas being that partisan conflicts are a thing of the past and that consensus can now be obtained through dialogue. Peace, prosperity and the implementation of human rights to anyone in the world are the message of those who talk about globalization and the universalization of liberal democracy. To these prospects Mouffe says:

I want to challenge this 'post-political vision'. My main target will be those in the progressive camp who accept this optimistic view of globalization and have become advocates of a consensual form of democracy. Scrutinizing some of the fashionable theories which underpin the post-political *Zeitgeist* in a series of fields - sociology, political theory and international relations - I will argue that such an approach is profoundly mistaken and that, instead of contributing to a 'democratization of democracy', it is at the origin of many of the problems that democratic institutions are currently facing (2005: 2).

Related to argumentation theory, and in particular to pragma-dialectics, some of Mouffe's points are of crucial interest. When Mouffe takes Habermas for task for imaging an "ideal speech situation" - and for arguing as if it could be real, this is an objection that strikes the pragma-dialectical theory as well. Inherent in the pragma-dialectical theory, there is a conception of an ideal speech situation, namely "the critical discussion", and its ten rules to be followed in order to reach agreement. The problem is that this kind of idealised context neglects the inherent pluralism in natural contexts, and it is far from any real situation met in political communication. It is also far from the rich scope of communication genres we find in election campaigns, which are all competitive in nature: In televised debates and interrogations, the debate climate tends to be

confrontational, hostile and even aggressive, and often with conversational shifts into quarrels (Sandvik 1997).

The question is what election campaign discourses are set out to do, or contribute to do. How do they work to fulfil their aim? What do political journalist and politicians act in order to inform and mobilise their audience? What is the role of emotions in this kind of discourse? Are they fallacious *per se* or do they contribute to inform and mobilise the electors?

Emotional argumentation can be described from an argumentative and an interactional perspective, and from a variety of settings. In my own studies of Norwegian election campaigns from 1999 till 2005, including radio debate interviews, television studio interrogations and newspaper interviews the following emotional phenomena are found: *ad hominem* arguments, *ad baculum* arguments, *ad misericordiam* arguments, straw man arguments, shifting the burden of proof, and *ad verecundiam* arguments (Sandvik 1997, 1998, 2004). An interactive perspective on this kind of discourse will reveal that emotions are accompanied by increased speech tempo, interruptions, strong initiatives, self selections, reformulations, meta-comments on form, and lack of modifiers (Sandvik 1998).

3. *Emotions and fallacies*

In my opinion argumentation theorists have treated emotions in argumentation too narrowly. Emotions are seen in a fallacy-perspective, thus indicating a wrongful and deceptive use. In his book *Emotions in Argument*, Walton treats the four emotional fallacies, the *ad misericordiam*, the *ad baculum*, the *ad populum*, and the *ad hominem*, and he can be accused for taking two positions. Firstly, he is saying that appeals to emotions are not inherently fallacious, but secondly, he is strongly warning us against using them. For example, while treating the *ad verecundiam*, he is saying: "The problem is not that appeal to pity is inherently irrational or fallacious. The problem is that such an appeal can have such a powerful impact that it easily gets out of hand, carrying a weight of presumption far beyond what the context of dialogue merits and distracting a respondent from more relevant and important considerations", and he continues with saying that it is "a kind of argument that automatically raises a warning signal" (Walton 1992, p. 142). Further, while treating the *ad populum*, he is saying: "Where this overly aggressive tactic of appealing to popular opinion or sentiment is used to block or hinder the legitimate goals of a dialogue, it is proper to allege that a fallacy of *ad*

populum has been committed” (Walton 1992, p. 102). In my opinion, these two examples are representative of how Walton treats appeals to emotions. On the one hand, he is not willing to deem them fallacious *per se*, but on the other hand his stylistics witnesses about another and deeply negative perception of emotional phenomena.

My point is that emotional appeals are of different kinds, and that emotions can be displayed by a variety of means. Both in election campaigns and in political argumentation in general, emotions play a crucial role, and I think it is in time to rethink the framework emotions are seen in, especially in political argumentation. I fully agree with Waltzer who claims that emotions mobilise in politics (Waltzer 2004), and with Mouffe that points out that emotions are closely connected with politics (Mouffe 2005). These are important insights, and they are quite different from how Walton approaches the phenomenon. While Mouffe welcomes emotions, Walton warns us against them.

4. *The case study*

I will now proceed to the case study with two different but still related orientations in mind: 1) Mouffe’s criticism of modern democracy’s fundamental belief on consensus and its universal validity and 2) with pragma-dialectics’ ideal speech situation, and the ten rules as a procedure to reach agreement. My question to the case study is: Can one of the two parties be accused for being fallacious? Can Mouffe’s criticism of consensus and ‘context-independent’ arguments and her welcoming of an antagonistic dimension be applied on a concrete sequence of real life political argumentation?

The political context for this case study is as follows: The episode takes place two weeks before the election for the Government, and as such it can be regarded as the starting point of the election campaigns of the two political parties. The female chairman of the Socialist Left Party, Kristin Halvorsen, confronts the Minister of Health, a representative for the Christian Democratic Party, Dagfinn Høybråten, for their morality and values, especially concerning women’s right to abortion and homosexuals’ right to adopt children. She is interviewed in the newspapers when saying:

- The Christian Democratic Party denounces and prejudices women’s right to abortion and homosexual’ right to adoption
- They restrict people’s right to choose a day care facility without a Christian statutes, and they refuse to give unmarried couples the same juridical status as married

- Their attitude towards biotechnology is very restrictive

How is the response from Høybråten on this confrontation? He responds by saying:

- I'm personally attacked!
- This is hurtful, disgraceful, intolerant, and undemocratic!

In other words, there is no counter-argumentation, he is evading the burden of proof, he makes an appeal to pity (I'm attacked), and he is putting forward an *ad hominem argument*: You behave ill, because you hurt me, you behave disgraceful, intolerant and undemocratic.

Sadly, we often see this pattern in political argumentation. When confronted and invited to debate important issues, the confronted party responds with emotional argumentation, thus refusing to defend his own standpoints. And the fight between two enemies is a reality, and there is a shift from discussion/debate to quarrel.

How then can we come to a discussion or a debate that fulfils Mouffe's agonistic model? And remember, this model presupposes that conflicts in a democracy neither can nor should be eliminated. Mouffe welcomes a conflictual discussion, undertaken with passion, but without an emotional debate style that prohibits real conflicts to appear, without ending up as enemies.

Who is fallacious in this case study? Isn't it the Minister of Health who is not willing to argue for his position, but instead attacks the party that invites him to discuss important political questions?

Political journalist in *Dagbladet*, Marie Simensen, gives an evaluation of the confrontation between Halvorsen and Høybråten, and she is critical against the Christian Democratic Party. They were given a chance to debate values, but they were not prepared to debate it at the time Halvorsen raised the issue. Instead of welcoming a discussion, they attacked Halvorsen saying that she contributed to a "dirty" election campaign (Simensen 2005).

In this case, emotions have been involved, mainly as a response to an invitation about difficult and sensitive topics. Unfortunately, the challenge was not met with discussion and efforts at counter-argumentation, but with an emotional counter-attack. No doubt, this a fallacious response.

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