

ISSA Proceedings 2014 - How To Blame In A Democracy?

Abstract: This paper challenges the view according to which speeches of praise and speeches of blame perform a similar political function of gathering citizens (around a hero in the case of praise and against a scapegoat in the case of blame). It is argued that the idea, seldom challenged in literature on epideictic rhetoric, that blame is merely a reverse mirror of praise, is due to an overemphasis on logos.

Keywords: artistic proofs, blame, catharsis, epideictic, homeostasis, homonoia, praise, rhetoric, violence

1. Introduction

To introduce my topic, I would like first to present George Kennedy main hypothesis in his book *Comparative Rhetoric* (1998). George Kennedy argued that the primary function of rhetoric in human societies is the preservation of existing social order. As he puts it: “The major function of rhetoric throughout the most of human history has been to preserve things as they are or to try to recover an idealized happier past” (1998, p. 216).

The history of research on argumentation and reasoning can be described as a struggle against such a natural tendency to conservatism. This history began with sophistic exercises such as *dissoi logoi* (twofold arguments)^[i] and, later, with Aristotle’s studies on the various ways one can attack someone else’s arguments, the identification of fallacious arguments and the definition of rules for rational discussion^[ii].

In this quest for tools to correct our reasoning biases, the status of epideictic rhetoric has always been disturbing. Epideictic speeches, with their depiction of a world clearly organized between the good people, ‘us’, and the bad people, ‘them’, appear as a revival of the naïve first steps of our humanity. One might thus understand why argumentation studies did not pay much attention to epideictic rhetoric: epideictic rhetoric appears to be nothing but what all of us spontaneously do when we stop struggling against our natural tendency to conservatism.

Some scholars, however, drew attention on the central role of epideictic rhetoric for the good functioning of any society, traditional and democratic alike (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958, p. 69; Hauser, 1999). Emmanuelle Danblon (2001) even argued that epideictic rhetoric is not outside of rationality: on the contrary, epideictic speeches, by maintaining a set of shared values, shape our collective intentionality (Searle, 1995), that is, our ability to agree and decide collectively. Endowed with such a political function, epideictic discourses seem worth studying.

In this respect, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is of little help. Indeed, Aristotle does not mention any explicit connection between epideictic speeches and the restatement of shared principles in a community. Aristotle only describes the means by which the orator can perform an effective speech of blame or praise (*Rhet.*, I, 9, 1366a-68b). He does not state that those blames and praises are means to strengthen common values. Such a political function of epideictic speeches seems nevertheless plausible in view of human rhetorical practices.

As far as blame is concerned, looking for a scapegoat seems to be a widely shared human reaction to a situation of crisis (Patou-Mathis, 2013, pp. 90-96). Along with the same line, philosophers and psychologists have long analysed the need for human societies, big and small, to define themselves against "outsiders" (Freud, 1930; Schmitt, 1932; Heller-Roazen, 2009; Crisp and Mileady, 2012). As far as praise is concerned, moments of grief are, then as now, accompanied by instants of harmony around the memory of the deceased. Remembering the deeds of glorious ancestors also seems to be an ancient and widely shared means to reinforce the links between the members of a community (Kennedy, 1998; Barry, to be published).

However, scholars who advocated for a political function of epideictic do not differentiate praise from blame in their inquiries: praise and blame are perceived as rhetorical tools to perform a similar political function of gathering citizens (around a hero in the case of praise and against a scapegoat in the case of blame). The aim of my paper is to challenge this consensually shared view: by studying a speech of blame I intend to demonstrate that praise and blame do not have the same political effect.

To do so, I will focus on a case study: Theodore Roosevelt's blame of an anarchist who killed president McKinley in September 1901 [iii]. At first glance, it would be

seducing to analyse this speech as an instance of a federating function of blame. Indeed an anarchist is, by definition, out of the community of citizens: he is an *atopos*. Blaming an anarchist would offer an opportunity to gather citizens against a scapegoat. However, by looking in detail to the construction of the three artistic proofs (*logos, ethos, pathos*) in Roosevelt's speech, I will challenge the very idea of blame as an effective tool to reinforce hearers' adhesion to shared values.

2. *Blame without ceremony*

My first comments have to do with the framework of the speech, with the context in which the speech took place. Roosevelt issued his blame at the beginning of his first state of the Union speech, delivered on the 3rd of December 1901 that is, three months after the president McKinley was shot to death by a young anarchist (a 28 years old steel worker named Leon Czolgosz).

First of all, it is worth noting that the state of the Union speech is a genuine institution in the American democracy. State of the Union speech was instituted by the American constitution and has been delivered almost every year by American presidents since George Washington's presidency[iv]. Those speeches have often been an opportunity to reinforce the feeling of brotherhood between American citizens. To do so, American presidents use several rhetorical techniques such as idealized stories of the first steps of the American nation or the narration of the deeds of the founding fathers[v]. Since Ronald Reagan presidency, American presidents were accustomed to conclude their speeches by the praise of an everyday hero: an officer of government, a successful businessman, a brave soldier, all of them embodying cherished American values[vi]. This brings me to my first point.

Speeches of blame are rare in the body of state of the Union speeches. This might be due to the fact that praise, contrary to blame, do not necessarily need to be connected to any particular current event: the state of the Union speech is itself an opportunity to deliver a speech of praise. By contrast, one does not blame just for the sake of it. In other words, I would argue that praises are ceremonial while blames are speeches for crisis. As a consequence, blames might be more spontaneous and more passionate than praises. With this in mind, I will now turn to the study of the three artistic proofs (*logos, ethos and pathos*) in Roosevelt's rhetoric.

3. *The artistic proofs*

In this section, I intend to provide an explanation of the absence of distinction, in most literature about epideictic rhetoric, between the political effects of praise and blame. My claim is that scholars have a strong tendency to focus their attention on logos. Such an overemphasis maintains the illusion of blame as a reversed mirror of praise. To dispel this illusion, I will analyse the construction of ethos and pathos in Roosevelt's blame. The diverging political function of praise and blame might thus appear.

3.1 *Logos: a symmetry between praise and blame?*

As stated above, logos is, in my view, the only feature of the rhetoric of blame that can be considered as similar to the rhetoric of praise. This similarity, as far as logos is concerned, is explicitly acknowledged by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*. In the 9th chapter of the first book, Aristotle details the lines of argument one should use in epideictic speeches. Most of those lines of argument have to do with speeches of praise. At the very end of his chapter, Aristotle concludes by stating that, in order to produce a speech of blame, the orator only has to do the contrary of a speech of praise: "No special treatment of censure and vituperation is needed. Knowing the above facts, we know their contraries; and it is out of these that speeches of censure are made" (*Rhet.* I, 9, 1368a).

Aristotle's comment on the symmetry between lines of argument in praise and blame can be illustrated with Theodore Roosevelt's speech. Let us take, for instance, the idea according to which "fine actions are distinguished from others by being intentionally good" (*Rhet.*, I, 9, 1367b). As a consequence, the orator "must try to prove that our hero's noble acts are intentional" (*Rhet.*, I, 9, 1367b). It appears that, in order to blame the anarchist, Roosevelt used precisely the contrary of this line of argument. For instance, when saying: "The anarchist is a criminal whose perverted instincts lead him to prefer confusion and chaos to the most beneficent form of social order" (Roosevelt, 1901). The symmetry between praise and blame works here. The hero deserves praise because, engaged in a situation in which there was a good and a bad option, he chose the good one. On the contrary, the bad man deserves blame since he is bound to always make the bad choice because of his perverted instincts. So far, praise and blame seem to be two sides of a same coin. Let us now turn to ethos and pathos.

3.2 *Ethos: would a phronimos blame?*

By now analysing the ethos of the orator issuing a blame, I intend to demonstrate that blame cannot be considered as the reversed mirror of praise.

Let us begin by analysing the orator's ethos in a speech of praise. It has often been noted that not anybody is legitimate to perform an epideictic speech (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958, p. 68; Kennedy, 1998, pp. 42-43; Hauser, 1999): the epideictic orator must, somehow, be a delegate of political power. I would thus argue that a speech of praise might reinforce social order because it offers the orator an opportunity to embody shared values. Indeed, by praising deeds that anybody will consider as praiseworthy, the orator will strengthen his legitimacy as a delegate of the people: he demonstrates his respect for the values cherished by his audience. In other words, the harmony between orator's ethos and the ethos of the praised hero might reinforce people's confidence in their leaders' morality and, thus, maintain social order. Now, my point is that such a way to maintain trust between members of a society only works with praise and not with blame. Indeed, in a speech of blame, the harmony occurs between the ethos of the orator and the ethos of the blamed character. As a consequence, the orator will present himself at odd with hearers' expectations about a truthful ethos. Let me now support my claim by analysing Roosevelt's ethos in his blame. The following quote is representative of his rhetorical choices:

For the anarchist himself, whether he preaches or practices his doctrine, we need not to have one particle more concern than for any ordinary murderer. He is not victim of social or political order. There are no wrong to remedy in his case. The cause of his criminality are to be found in his own evil passion and in the own evil conduct of those who urge him on, not in any failure by others or by the State to do justice to him or his. He is in no sense, in no shape or way, 'a product of social condition'. (Roosevelt, 1901)

I would like to contrast Roosevelt's rhetoric with the qualities of the truthful ethos according to Aristotle:

There are three things which inspire confidence in the orator's own character-the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: good sense (phronesis), good moral character (arete), and goodwill (euonia). (Aristotle, Rhet, II, 1, 1378a)

All those qualities are lacking in Roosevelt's blame. There is obviously no goodwill in a speech of blame. In addition, by insisting on the reasons why one should not find any attenuating circumstances to the criminal, the orator appears as merciless and obsessed: those features are hardly consistent with a good moral

character. Finally, as far as *phroneisis* is concerned, the orator seems to be overwhelmed by his anger and thus unable to make a wise decision. How then could an audience be willing to be governed by such a leader? Because of fear, possibly. This brings us to the third and last artistic proof: *pathos*.

3.3 *Pathos: can we reach homonoia by anger and fear?*

Let me begin by an explanation of the way emotions produced by a speech of praise might contribute to reinforce the links between members of a society. Following Philippe Kreutz (2001), I would argue that a speech of praise is likely to arise mainly two emotions: admiration and proudness. Those emotions might create a willingness to follow the hero's example and thus stimulate a disposition to act in accordance with shared values. I would add to this picture that praise might have a quietening effect: hearers feeling proud of what they are will not challenge the existing social order. To use a physiological term, I would say that praise maintains *social homeostasis* (Damasio, 2003, pp. 176-180): the smooth and balanced functioning of a metabolism.

On the contrary, blame is likely to raise the anger of the hearers and their impulse for revenge. I would thus argue that blame is likely to disturb homeostasis. The last sentence of Roosevelt's blame supports this view: "*The American people are slow to wrath, but when their wrath is once kindled it burns like a consuming flame*" (Roosevelt, 1901).

Let me now summarize my analysis. My first point is that seizing the diverging political effects of praise and blame requires looking beyond logos. My second point is that praise is a circumstantial discourse; by contrast, blame is a speech of crisis. By this I mean that it only makes sense to deliver a speech of blame if there is someone to blame. On the contrary, a speech of praise can be a part of a ceremony, unrelated to current events. This second point has consequences for the ethos of the orator. In a situation of crisis, such as the killing of a president, the orator might be genuinely outraged, his rhetoric might be more spontaneous and out of control than in a speech of praise. Still about ethos, my third point is that it seems difficult for the orator delivering a blame to build a truthful ethos. And I would argue that the distance that might thus be established between the orator and the audience disrupts the sharing of a feeling of brotherhood. Finally, about emotions, I suggested that praise is pacifying while blame is disquieting.

Starting from this analysis, I would express serious doubts about the opportunity

to use blame as a federative rhetorical tool[vii]. Blame is, in my view, more a symptom of a lack of control in a crisis situation than a rhetorical tool to face a crisis. This brings me to the title of my paper: how to blame in a democracy? In other words, is blame worthy of interest for rhetoricians, as a kind of speech one should teach in rhetorical courses? I will conclude with a proposal on this issue.

4. *Conclusion: exploring the cathartic function of blame*

To begin with, I shall go back, one last time, to Theodor Roosevelt's speech. It is worth noting that, at the time of the delivery of the speech, the judiciary institution had already fulfilled its role: the president's killer had been arrested, his case has been debated in justice court, a jury decided to sentence him to death and he was electrocuted. Why blaming a dead man? My interpretation is that Roosevelt's need to reopen the anarchist's case in the form of blame illustrates a basic need for an archaic practice of justice: a justice in which the good people can satisfy their revenge against the bad people. In the long history of the domestication of violence by human institutions (Freud, 1930; Pires, 1998; Pinker, 2011), blame appears as a regressive force. There is, however, a view in which blame might, on the contrary, contribute to a pacification of society: if blame were to be used as a tool for *catharsis* (Aristotle, *Poet.*, vi, 1449b), that is, as a harmless means to relief hearers from their violence (Tisseron, 1996, pp. 188-191).

We don't have yet any evidence that blame might actually perform such a function. Psychological studies, so far, gave contradictory results on this issue: observing violence might increase or decrease observers' propensity for violence (Konecni & Doob, 1972; Leyens, 1977; Scheff & Bushnell, 1984; Scheff, 2007; Gentile, 2013). What would be the rhetorical features of a blame that would perform a cathartic function? Is there any way in which blame might be used as a sophisticated alternative to basic violence? Here is an interesting challenge for a rhetorician.

NOTES

- i. On the pedagogical value of *dissoi logoi* for the training of critical thinking skills, see Danblon (2013, pp. 127-148) and Ferry (2013).
- ii. I refer here to Aristotle's *Topics*, *Sophistical refutations* and *Rhetoric*.
- iii. Roosevelt issued the blame in his first state of the Union address, on the 3rd of December 1901.
- iv. The third section of the second article of the U.S. Constitution states that: "He

[the president] shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient”.

v. The peroration of Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 state of the Union speech offers telling examples of those rhetorical tools. For instance, when saying: “It was once barren land. The angular hills were covered with scrub cedar and a few large live oaks. Little would grow in that harsh caliche soil of my country. And each spring the Pedernales River would flood our valley. But men came and they worked and they endured and they built. And tonight that country is abundant” (Johnson, 1965).

vi. Ronald Reagan famously concluded his 1982 state of the Union speech by praising a young employee of government, Lenny Skutnik, who jumped in the water to rescue a woman after a plane crash on Potomac River. After describing the deeds of this everyday hero, Reagan attempted to spread a feeling of proudness among his hearers: “And then there are countless, quiet, everyday heroes of American who sacrifice long and hard so their children will know a better life than they’ve known; church and civic volunteers who help to feed, clothe, nurse, and teach the needy; millions who’ve made our nation and our nation’s destiny so very special-unsung heroes who may not have realized their own dreams themselves but then who reinvest those dreams in their children” (Reagan, 1982).

vii. I am aware that there is a strong counterargument to the view expressed above. There are many instances of political regimes grounded on fear of the leader and on a rejection of the “others”: blame therefore seems to be an effective tool to gather citizens. Against this view, I would argue that the emotions from blame, anger and fear, do not federate citizens in the same way that admiration and proudness do. Political regimes based on fear of the leader and on the opposition to the “others” (such as Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s USSR, Khomeini’s Iran or contemporay North Korea) are more characterized by general mistrust between citizens (and by massive practices of neighbours’ denunciations) than by a generalized feeling of brotherhood.

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