

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Argumentation, Debate And Refutation In Contemporary Argentine Political Discourse



1. Introduction

My presentation deals with political discourse but also refers to the theory of argumentation, policy theory and political debate. It has four points, apart from the introduction, the first point points out the history of a conflict in Argentina between government and the farmers lobby. The second point is a theoretical one and it is referred to in the “argumentative turn”. The third point deals with the rhetoric and the concept of ethos. The fourth point tries to connect the Rhetoric with political discourse and the fifth point, the theory with the speeches of the President to show how she managed the ethos and the problems she has had to face in order to become credible. The end is the Conclusion in which I try to synthesize the mistaken attitudes that led her to the present situation in which she has been involved for some years.

I would like to present some general thoughts about multi disciplinary and multi dimensional approaches illustrated by some examples of the present political debates in Argentina.

One often uses multi disciplinary in order to characterize approaches where clearly separated disciplines are involved, such as linguistics, sociology and political theory, or as in my work, politics and rhetoric.

Why do I consider this multi disciplinary and multi dimensional approach to be preferable to a more mono dimensional approach? The reason is that if one wants to study and clarify a complex phenomenon of verbal as well as of non-verbal nature, like political discourse, in a better and more comprehensive way, it is necessary to add different viewpoints. The complexity of the subject, as in this case, connected with political power leads to breaking down some of the boundaries, considered as ‘artificial’, between different disciplines. In this context, eclecticism can be understood as the practice of selecting what seems

best and more fruitful from several sets of concepts, beliefs or theories.

A researcher who wants to work with social discourses is always in permanent danger of being trapped in uncontrolled eclecticism. This is a danger in which a discourse researcher must be particularly aware of. Uncontrolled eclecticism means that one keeps in consideration different perspectives without evaluating in which way they can match and how different terminologies can be unified.

2. History of the conflict

Export duties to farmers were introduced in 2002 by president Eduardo Duhalde to cope with the country's worst financial meltdown on record that caused the fall of the Alliance government in late 2001 amid deadly riots.

The economy recovered at an average of nearly nine percent in each of the five years approximately that of which Fernández de Kirchner's husband, Néstor Kirchner, governed the country. However he maintained and even increased export taxes in which his wife refused to lower.

When Cristina Fernández de Kirchner replaced her husband on 10th of December 2007 as president, she inherited a relatively favorable position. On the heels of an economic recovery and high popularity ratings, she seemed poised to continue the policies that helped rid Argentina of its debt. Less than eight months later, she was in the driver's seat of what could become quite the lame-duck presidency in Argentine history. Much of the instability stems from the conflict between the agricultural sector and the government.

In response to tax hikes on the 11th of March 2008 on main exports such as soybeans and other farm products, with Argentina's most powerful group, El Campo and the entities that comprise it took to the streets blocking domestic and international trade routes in the largest protests against the government since the financial meltdown of 2001.

Demonstrations in favor of the government and in favor of the agricultural sector were staged as a way of exerting pressure to support each of the two opposite positions. On the one hand farmers who demanded soybean export taxes slashed-out and on the other hand the government increasing export taxes.

The standoff was partially resolved when a controversial vote by Cristina's own vicepresident Julio Cobos voted against her various tax hikes. The situation was an embarrassment to the administration and her often criticized stubbornness succeeded in alienating the president further from her supporters. More importantly, the result of "Resolution 125", as it was known in the Argentine

Congress, may be a sign that the unsustainable “Kirchnerista” policies that propelled Argentina out of its economic crisis may have reached their limit. With more than two years remaining and a dismal approval rating hovering around 20-30%, the question remains as to whether Fernández de Kirchner can reclaim the popularity that catapulted her into the role of Argentina’s second woman’s presidency back in October 2007.

High commodity prices, which could be of great benefit for Argentina given that they are one of the world’s largest commodity exporters, have failed to come to fruition-out the fear of out-of-control inflation. However, while she may not have the status of her husband/predecessor, the amount of time left on her term means that she has the chance to win back the hearts and minds of the Argentine people. Distancing herself from her husband’s policies would be a good place to start. For Cristina’s presidency to maintain any credibility, she might have to go back to the issues that most affect her constituency base and bridge the wide gap that her unrelenting stance which the “el campo” has created.

Cristina’s presidency will always be marred by the failure to reach an agreement with one of Argentina’s wealthiest and most powerful entities and the embarrassing outcome of her own vice-president voting against her. However, with over almost two years left, it remains to be seen if Cristina can rebound from the onslaught of negative events that have occurred since she assumed the presidency. Working in her favor are her alliances with other left-leaning presidents in the region such as Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez who can provide cheap energy to Argentina, and a commitment to strong business relationship with Brazil. She has her work cut-out for her but all is not lost for the beleaguered Argentine president.

Mr. Cobos was forced to vote as senators from Argentina’s provinces were at a deadlock with 36 in favor of the government and 36 in favor of the agricultural sector. In his speech prior to his vote, Mr. Cobos expressed his hope that his decision would not be considered a betrayal to President Cristina Kirchner. He expressed his desire to continue his role as Vice President. It was Cobos that recommended to the President that the conflict should be decided by the legislative branch rather than an executive mandate. Beyond the political and financial impacts of the decision, the result, respected by the executive branch, sent a clear message to investors that the democratic process is securely in place.

From the very start until its closure, the conflict can be seen as a battle for control of the construction of meaning. Each sector fought to win the discursive production space in all areas. The public scene became a semiotic crusade by production, circulation and consumption of significance.

The period was rich in terms of the proliferation of linguistic and non-linguistic signs, involving the definition of distinct high value areas. The gamble was about more than a mere tax amendment.

3. The argumentative turn

I will refer to the “argumentative turn” (Turnball, 2005, p. 39) in policy theory that represents an important critique of the traditional conception of policy making. “It showed that uncertainty and contingency characterize policy discourse, and that policy making is argumentative and rhetorical rather than scientific. The scope of this recovery of rhetoric is limited because of the classical philosophical division between logic and rhetoric. These two domains also remain separate in contemporary theories of rhetoric, such as those used in the argumentative turn, preventing us from further incorporating rhetoric within policy theory. But Michel Meyer shows that the division between logic and rhetoric relates to the suppression of questioning in philosophy. By recovering questioning as the principle of reason, he establishes rhetoric upon a foundation of questioning, and thus provides a new way forward”. (Turnball, 2005, p. 42).

The “argumentative turn” in policy theory digressed from the rational model of policy making by focusing on language, interpretative epistemology, and plausible reason rather than formal logic. While policy theorists only recently took an interest in argumentation and rhetoric, specialists in rhetoric certainly took notice of Harold Lasswell, one the founders of the ‘policy sciences’ field. Lasswell was interested in persuasion and propaganda, and the rhetorical effects of mass communication in policy making. He thought that rhetoric was important for the ancient Greek philosophers, and believed that the discredit directed towards it ever since Plato’s condemnation of the Sophists represented an obstruction to proper inquiry into it. Despite this attention to language and argumentation, the argumentative turn in policy studies did not arrive for some time. Even today we have not realized the full implications of rhetoric and argumentation for studying policy and politics.

The argumentative turn is related to the scholarly interest in discourse. Policy theorists have studied the role of language in political discourse, refusing the idea

that meaning is attached to ontological truth. Political discourse is framed in ordinary language, which is capable of considerable flexibility of meaning. Policy discourse takes on different meaning in different contexts and for different audiences. Because knowledge, in particular policy knowledge, is bound within ordinary language, it is a social process and therefore argumentative. Decisions do not settle the meaning of policy, which remains subject to debate, and consequently the policy process is less than the problem solving idea proposed by Lasswell, and more of a struggle to create meaning throughout the policy process and in different locations. Policy actors try to persuade others to share the meaning they attribute to events. Political actors employ arguments to bring others around to their position and justify themselves with respect to the public interest. The double mission of persuasion and justification henceforth constitute the basis of the argumentative turn.

We need the argumentation because we do not answer in pre-programmed ways to events but can change our minds on the meaning of something, rethink our values, and vary the degree to which we support someone or some policy. This requires persuasion. Political actors usually use rhetoric to secure the assent of others to their views or their cooperation. And in this way we think that discourses pronounced during the conflict by President Cristina Fernández had the problem of persuading the audiences.

If we understand rationality as contingency, indeterminacy, uncertainty, or argumentation, problemat�city defines the qualities of contemporary discourse in many fields. Problemat�city is the domain of rhetoric. In general, rhetoric appears in times of crisis when stable systems of values break down and new systems co-exist with the old. It appeared in ancient Athens as a response to unresolved conflicts in pre-Socratic cosmologies, and today we see a breakdown of traditional value systems with the arrival of the 'postmodern condition'. At a general level the rhetorical or argumentative turn forms part of the critique of Enlightenment thought. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explain this by pointing out that whereas Descartes eliminated the probable from knowledge, the non-compulsive element of argumentation is directly opposed to the idea of self-evident truth in which propositions follow upon each other necessarily and without appeal. Hence this contemporary revival of the ancient tradition of rhetoric constitutes a break with the dominant form of philosophical reason.

4. Rhetoric in political discourse

With Erik C. W. Krabbe (Krabbe, 2002, p. 29) we shall understand by “dialectics” the practice and theory of conversations; by “rhetoric” the practice and theory of speeches. Conversations, then, constitute instances of the practice of dialectics, whereas speeches constitute instance of the practice of rhetoric.

Aristotle defines rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever” (Rhet. I. 2.1, 1355b26-27). These means encompass not only arguments (logos), but also display of character by the speaker (ethos) and arousing emotion in the hearers (pathos) (Rhet. I 2. 3-6, 1356a 1-20). Thus the definition covers a wide range of speech activities, be it that they must all be related to persuasion. Logos constitutes the core-business of rhetoric, but other means of persuasion are not neglected by Aristotle. The range of rhetoric is narrowed down to three main types or genres of speeches, each with its own ends: the deliberative, the forensic, and the epideictic; there is an alleged proof that these are all the kinds there are.

Aristotle's remarks on the usefulness of rhetoric. Rhetoric can be used:

- (1) to defend proper decisions (you may be right, but you will still need to convince others, otherwise you are to blame)
- (2) to convince those who cannot follow scientific arguments;
- (3) to be able to argue both for and against the same proposition; not, indeed, in order to actually do so, but in order to have a realistic view of an issue and not to be duped by fallacies.

I. A. Richards (Richards, 1950, p. 33) defined rhetoric as “the studies of the causes and the remedies of misunderstanding”. This standpoint will be useful to see why Cristina's speeches had so many problems to become convincing about the justice of the proposal made about taxes.

5. Ethos in Cristina's speeches

Ethos (Greek for ‘character’) refers to the trustworthiness or credibility of the writer or speaker. Ethos is often conveyed through tone and style of the message and through the way the writer or speaker refers to differing views. It can also be affected by the author or speaker's reputation as it exists independently from the message, his or her expertise in the field, his or her previous record or integrity and so forth. The impact of ethos is often called the argument's ethical appeal or the appeal from credibility.

People interpret the world more easily through narratives and characters than

legal- rational discourse, so they follow political action and debate the legitimacy of government through the ethos of the players. This is why commentators even attribute 'character' to a government and seek an identity in it which matches popular perceptions of national culture and the spirit of the times.

During the conflict, the President had a strong presence in media through demonstrations in order to explain the tax structure for agricultural products. But she, as her husband, was not accustomed to give press conferences, to have a fluid contact with journalists and distrust of interviews on radio or TV. At the end of the conflict she gave the first press conference and it was clear that she was able to answer every question made fluently even if one could be in disaccord with her. The style of the couple is weird and at the same time it seems that they make politics like gambling, building a betting system. Dialog is an activity that is not in their agenda. They are not accustomed to reach a consensus in way.

She called for major popular demonstrations. Each of them displayed the use of fiery rhetoric and at the same time, the construction of an erratic ethos. The last major demonstration was resolved with the intervention of the president's husband, former president and chairman of the Justice Party who the orated much of the discussion as the main debator.

In her first presentation she argued that nobody could do anything to persuade her to change her position. then after another demonstration she spoke to her "voters", then to her party, then to the "citizens" but in a later demonstration she remembered that at the beginning of her presidency she had said that everything will be more difficult for her because she was a woman and that for women everything in this society is more difficult. So in a short period, she used different arguments to establish her viewpoint.

At the same time, in some demonstrations she mentioned "The People" and in other demonstrations she spoke to the "citizens", in some cases she aimed at those who were always against her popular projects.

6. Conclusion

From the beginning of her presidency it was clear that she had a long and strong career in the political arena. She was a representative and senator and had a pompous eloquence in the Representative chamber and in the Senate. She was well recognized by her epic magnificent discourses but at the same time during her husband's mandate she did not try to appear frequently so not to cast a shadow over him.

In some moments she said that a political woman must not use the name of her husband to make political hay or to be recognized. But, at the same time, she uses her husband's name and everybody knows that they act like a couple acting in politics. This is not the case of Michele Bachelet, the former president of Chile, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State of the United States or Angela Merkel, Germany's Prime Minister, who are political women that act alone in the political arena.

Since Cristina became president, her husband continued to doggedly make political hay from a non-located place. In January he went to Colombia to try to solve a conflict with the FARC. In February he became president of the Justice Party and in March triggered the conflict. So, problems are not only from the opponents but also from the way in which the couple split their work in order to clarify and strengthen the executive branch.

This situation contributes to weaken the president because nobody knows where the power is and who is making the decisions. The erratic ethos is a consequence of an uncomfortable place that they choose because they thought that could be a way to maintain the power for a third period.

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