

PROOFS OF THE PAST: RHETORICAL APPROACHES TO DIFFICULT MEMORIES

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Abstract

Contemporary political disputes over the past are often characterized as a struggle between the historical facts and the narratives that are constructed about those facts. This presentation returns to the classical rhetorical tradition to think about the relationship between memory and rhetoric and the relationship between facts and accounts. The talk is grounded in a concrete example of efforts to remember a displaced community and the interplay between material facts and communal narratives.

Keywords: Rhetoric – Memory – Argument – Proofs – Materiality.

Resumen

Las disputas políticas contemporáneas en torno al pasado suelen ser caracterizadas como luchas entre los hechos históricos y las narrativas construidas alrededor de esos hechos. Esta presentación retorna a la tradición retórica clásica para pensar la relación entre memoria y retórica y la relación entre hechos y relatos. Me baso en un ejemplo concreto sobre los esfuerzos para recordar una comunidad desplazada y el intercambio entre hechos materiales y narrativas de la comunidad.

Palabras clave: retórica – memoria – argumento – pruebas – materialidad.

Ours is an age of conflict and a remarkable number of local, regional, national, and global conflicts entail disagreements about our shared past. Scholars of public memory have long acknowledged memory as a dynamic phenomenon rife with conflict and divergences but the urgency and consequences of these conflicts have been particularly pronounced over the past few decades. A few global examples may help to give a clearer sense of what is at stake in recent controversies over memory.

In Turkey, the Turkish government has gone to great lengths to deny the existence of the Armenian genocide –in which, beginning in 1915 the Ottoman government exterminated 1.5 million Armenians and caused millions more to flee. There is an on-going global political struggle to push the Turkish government to recognize the events of 1915 as genocide though the Turkish government maintains the million plus deaths

were the result of the Great War and Influenza. The Turkish government has created pamphlets, websites, and various presentations by governmental offices to alter the narrative of this historical event in an effort to rewrite global history. More dramatically, the government has used “Article 301 of the penal code, on ‘insulting Turkishness’” to prosecute individuals for highlighting the mass deaths, including Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk (“Armenian...”, 2016).

In my home country, the United States, the past few years have seen violent, even deadly, protests related to the presence of memorials to Confederate Civil War soldiers in southern cities. Over 100 statues commemorating the Confederacy have been removed but more than a thousand remain and some organizations have mobilized to defend the existence of these monuments in public spaces (“Confederate Memorials...”, 2017). Others, of course, object to the continued public commemoration of a rebellious region whose primary concern was maintaining the system of slavery. In places like Charlottesville, New Orleans, and even Austin, Texas, some have contended that the presence of these monuments represents a validation of the racist basis of the southern rebellion during the Civil War while others seek to defend the presence of these monuments as simply marking the historical facts of events and individuals.

In Poland, the Polish government recently amended the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance to make it illegal to attribute blame for crimes of the Holocaust to the Polish government or people. Deputy Justice Minister, Patryk Jaki, contended, “We have to send a clear signal to the world that we won’t allow for Poland to continue being insulted” (qtd in John, 2018). Critics of this law have raised concerns about the way the government is seeking to control and constrain discussions about the nation’s past. As Tara John (2018) reports, “The proposed legislation has raised concerns among critics about how the Polish state will decide what it considers to be facts.”

Each of these examples suggests the importance that we still place on the events of the past; on how the past is interpreted, the values we attribute to it, and, ultimately, how the questions of the past are resolved. Each of these examples also highlights a persistent theme in struggles over public memory; namely, a sense of tension between the narratives we craft about our past and the “facts” of the past. This question of “fact” versus opinion or “spin” has become increasingly prominent in global discussions of not only memory but also politics in general, a concern that in the United States often goes under the term “fake news”.

In my few moments with you, I want to suggest that the Western rhetorical tradition can provide useful ways of thinking about the relationship between rhetoric and memory and, indeed, that in the classical rhetorical tradition rhetoric and memory were viewed as deeply interrelated. More to the present point, I will suggest that the classical rhetorical tradition provides ways of thinking about how we seek to justify our claims and the complex relationship between the “facts” of the past and our accounts of that past. To pursue this suggestion, I will begin by noting some of the interconnections between memory and rhetoric in ancient Greek thought. Next, I will delve a bit deeper into the Aristotelian conception of proofs as a way of thinking about the connections between facts and accounts. Finally, I will try to explore the relationship between historical facts and materials and the accounts we seek to craft around them by considering a concrete example.

MEMORY AND RHETORIC IN CLASSICAL TRADITION

Typically, when we think of memory in the classical rhetorical tradition, we think of the Romans. It was, after all, the Romans who instituted the “canons” of rhetoric – a way of formalizing Greek thought into clear and organized stages or areas of emphasis. *Memoria* stood as one of the crucial canons of rhetoric along with Invention, Organization, Style, and Delivery. In this schema, *memoria* is often understood in relation to the sophisticated systems for remembering arguments and pieces of evidence – the mnemonic devices that would occupy the thinking of numerous philosophers through to the Renaissance (Yates, 2001).

But, I’d like to suggest that this remarkable attention to systems of remembrance have their roots in an earlier and more theoretically interesting sense of memory – namely, that memory could be dangerous. Plato certainly thought so. You may recall that in the *Theaetetus*, Plato (1992) offers the metaphor that memory is like an impression left in a piece of wax. In this sense, acts of remembrance do not occur in relation to the actual event of the past but in relation to the impression it left upon us. Memory, then, is ultimately an experience of absence and for Plato the key question was how we could make sure that what we imagine fills that space of absence is accurate. Indeed, Plato argued that the same empty space in which we conjure images of the past through remembrance was also the space of fantasy and imagination. For Plato the

capacity to remember and the capacity to imagine something fantastic were essentially the same. Thus, the question of whether what we remember is real or fantasy was particularly pressing. For Plato, the great danger in our processes of memory was our capacity to misremember or, as M.J. Levett translates the relevant passages in the *Theaetetus*, “other-judging”. For Plato, and especially his student Aristotle, the danger of “other-judging” recommended careful and systematic approaches to remembering the past and it was from this initial Greek anxiety that later philosophers embarked upon their quests to discipline memory, to bring it under tight control.

Rhetoric, of course, caused a similar anxiety for Plato. The capacity of eloquent speakers –like Gorgias– to enchant audiences and draw them to what the philosopher felt were false judgments was central to Plato’s early condemnation of rhetoric. Rhetorical appeals could, like the false memory, lead people to judge-wrongly and, even more to the point, both rhetoric and memory worked in the same way –conjuring up images to fill the space of possibility. At their heart, both rhetoric and memory are exercises in speculation, of conjuring images before an audience in the hopes that they would accept these speculative fantasies as compelling and, thus, essentially real.

This same concern about rhetoric is also evident in the later Plato’s efforts –in the *Phaedrus*– to construct a noble rhetoric, one grounded not so much in the capacity to persuade but in the capacity to amplify the Truth. And, of course, we know that much of the classical tradition of rhetorical theory focused on attempting to somehow ground the capacity to persuade into philosophy, truth, and ethics. Whether it is Aristotle’s declaration that rhetoric is the “counterpart” of dialectic, or Quintilian’s insistence that the art of rhetoric entails “a good person speaking well”, much of the classical tradition is devoted to disciplining the undisciplined and potentially dangerous capacities to persuade.

PROOFS AND THE PAST

For Aristotle, the key to bringing the unruly practices of rhetoric into line with his more controlled and systematic worldview was through anchoring persuasion in proofs. Rhetoric was an art, for Aristotle (1991: 37), of “observing in any given situation the available means of persuasion” and these “means of persuasion” were understood to be proofs. As most students of rhetoric will recall, Aristotle distinguishes two broad types

of proofs, which we often translate as artistic and inartistic. Artistic proofs are *entechnic*, proofs embodied within the art of persuasion or, as Aristotle puts it in the Kennedy translation, “whatever can be prepared by method and by us”. These, as students of rhetoric will recall, include proofs of logic (*Logos*) of emotion (*Pathos*) and character (*Ethos*). Inartistic, or *atechnic*, proofs are those that are “preexisting” in that they exist outside the individual rhetor’s construction. As a speaker, in other words, we invent the artistic proofs while the inartistic proofs exist outside our inventional efforts.

Now, it is worth pausing here to consider the similarity this distinction between the invented forms of persuasion and the proofs that are preexisting has with some of our contests over memory. Many of the conflicts over the past entail a struggle between the narratives around the past and what are asserted to be the “facts” of the past. As noted, in the United States this conflict has come to cluster around the term “fake news”, in which each side of a dispute claims to be on the side of facts while accusing the other of being on the side of narratives; or, to put it in an Aristotilean frame, one side claims to be based on inartistic proofs while accusing the other side of being purely artistic. The chaotic struggles over what counts as truth has led to what Henry Giroux (2018: 197) calls “a crisis of memory, agency, and education” and, I’d like to suggest at its roots is the question of both public memory and of rhetorical proofs.

The current crisis of memory seems to be driven, at least in part, by the ways each side in a conflict seeks to claim the evidently superior epistemological ground of inartistic proofs, or facts. Or, as Patrick Finney (2017: 155) puts it, we find ourselves in a crisis “peculiarly and multiply fraught with anxieties about authenticity”. However, in returning to Aristotle we find that such a hard line of distinction between artistic and inartistic is largely unwarranted. As Michael Gagarin (1990: 25) notes, the term for inartistic proof should not be so much translated as “evidence” but as “evidentiary materials”. As he notes, a preexisting fact or material “is not in itself proof, or even necessarily evidence but material the speaker may use as it suits the need of [the] case”. Indeed, as Gagarin argues, the persuasive power of either artistic or inartistic proofs are “indistinguishable” in that both rely on the capacity of the rhetor to weave them into the persuasive case.

In this way, inartistic proofs are not so much prior conditions around which a rhetor must navigate their persuasive efforts as they are materials that can be selected in the construction of a case. As Gagarin (1990: 25) notes, “there is no hint that the [inartistic proofs] are logically historically prior to the artistic [proofs]”. Or, in other words, for

preexisting materials to function as proofs they must be selected by the rhetor and framed in a persuasive manner. As Richard Enos and Janice Lauer (1992: 81) argue, rhetors “create meaning by advancing [preexisting] proof as well as by inventing new proofs”. In terms of their persuasive capacity to craft messages and shape worldviews, inartistic and artistic proofs can be understood as identical.

Returning to the debates around public memory, claims of epistemological advantage based in “facts” are, in this way, untenable. This is not to deny the existence of facts, but to assert that facts do not lead to judgments, rhetoric does. And when rhetors select facts they do so in the service of guiding judgments and these persuasive efforts are judged by their capacity to move an audience. Thus, the crucial insight is that “facts” only have persuasive power through the ways they are selected and framed by the rhetor.

Thinking back to the global examples I mentioned during my introduction –in Turkey, Poland, and the United States– we can now see them as contests not over the “facts of the past” but over which evidentiary material is selected and, moreover, claims that the materials they have selected constitute the singularly defining facts that should shape any deliberative efforts. In the case of the Confederate monuments in the United States, those seeking to preserve the monuments assert that the history they memorialize is fact and therefore this facticity warrants the presence of these statues; regardless of the social provocations they entail. In Turkey, the government is working to officially reframe the past by asserting a new interpretive framework that will explain the facts of widespread death among Armenians. And in one of the more egregious cases, the Polish government has insisted that their framing of the historical facts is the only legally acceptable way of discussing the past.

Thus far, the main point of my argument has been the importance of not privileging inartistic proofs when deliberating about the past. And, indeed, I would extend the argument by suggesting the importance of providing space for on-going deliberation about our past. Memory, as numerous scholars have pointed out, is remarkably dynamic and fluid. Our attempts to fix it, to craft it in stone, to place limits on its discussion are not only politically misguided but, arguably, untenable. Given its ineffable and unstable nature, memory will simply not be contained. But, in the remainder of my time with you today, I want to shift focus away from this relatively standard argument about the importance of artistic proofs in the discussions about memory and consider instead the importance of inartistic proofs. Evidentiary materials, I will suggest, ought not be

thought of as simply inert materials awaiting our selection. Indeed, much of the recent scholarship on the rhetorics of new materialism has emphasized that objects have agency in the crafting of rhetorical accounts (Rickert, 2013).

I'd like to suggest that the agency of material objects, of inartistic proof, is especially evident during times of turmoil and trauma. Trauma, as scholars like Cathy Caruth (2016), have argued represents a substantial challenge to both memory and to rhetoric. In much contemporary trauma theory, traumatic events are understood as a kind of rupture that entails not only one's memory but one's very sense of self. Julia Kristeva (1989: 222), for instance, conceives trauma as a kind of "shattering of psychic identity" and Claire Sisco King (2012: 34) suggests trauma entails a sense of one's perspective being "torn apart or shattered". Thus, the problem of memory in relation to trauma is that the event is so profoundly rupturing that it makes not only a coherent recollection difficult but even poses a threat to the psyche of the one remembering. Traumatic memories, thus, rarely emerge as coherent and persuasive memories but, rather, often in fragments and glimpses of the event that has proved so rupturing.

The rhetorical conundrum of trauma is captured by the way many scholars define traumatic experiences as incomprehensible, as unspeakable, or as Caruth (2016: 9) puts it, an "impossible saying". Reframing trauma theory into an Aristotelian frame, we might contend that the traumatic event proves resistant to artistic proofs in that it not only ruptures the speaker's coherent experience but also constitutes a rupture in the speaker's very psyche. Returning to Plato's wax metaphor, if experiences leave impressions on our soul, traumatic experiences puncture and tear the soul and, in this way, leave the space for an artistic reconstruction of the past jagged and fragmented.

But, if traumas are wounds they also leave scars. While we often think of the scars of trauma as ephemeral, as purely psychic or cultural, they also manifest in the world as physical damage, as eyewitness accounts, as testimonies, as confessions. Thus, the scars of trauma constitute a useful remnant of the traumatic event and one that can become part of our memory of the past. Or, to put it into an Aristotelian frame, they serve as inartistic proofs by supplying evidentiary materials for later rhetorical accounts.

TRAUMATIC SPACE AND RHETORICS OF REMEMBRANCE

In the final section of my talk, I want to think a bit about the role that inartistic proofs might play in the rhetorical efforts to reconstitute a coherent account of past traumatic events. To be clear, my purpose is not to assert any epistemic superiority for inartistic proofs but, rather, to think about the ways that the evidentiary materials left by traumatic event can serve the inventional processes of rhetoric. I want, in other words, to think about the roles of inartistic proofs in the rhetorical construction of public memory in the aftermath of trauma. I'd like in this way to suggest that inartistic proofs – the residue and remnants of traumas– serve as something more than just evidentiary materials. As such, inartistic proofs may play a more active role in the crafting and recrafting of public accounts of the past by actively calling forth rhetorics of public memory and by providing an archive from which accounts of the past can be constructed.

In order to consider these roles, I think it best to ground our thinking in concrete examples. As Kevin O'Neill and Alexander Hinton (2009: 5) note, “while scholars make distinctions between truth, memory, and representation for the sake of analytical clarity, these divisions become problematic on the ground”. So too, I'd like to suggest, the distinction between inartistic proofs and artistic proofs and between facts and invention are also blurred in the actual processes of recalling memories and crafting public accounts of the past. The example I will discuss is a project I was involved with and entails communal efforts to engage with a past trauma.

Let me tell you a bit about my home in Syracuse, New York. The city was first incorporated in 1825 and for much of its early years the very center of the city served as the neighborhood for the working class, the poor, and for immigrants (O'Connor, 1997). Indeed, up until the end of the Second World War the city's center was the only place where Jewish residents were allowed to live. This area, known as the 15th Ward, was home to a vibrant Jewish and immigrant community until the end of the War when blatant anti-Semitism was less socially acceptable. As Jewish families began moving out of the 15th Ward, the increasing migration of African American families, who were drawn to the Northeast from the American South by the promise of jobs and hopes for a less deeply racial segregated society, largely settled into the 15th Ward. The population of the 15th Ward increased throughout the late 40s and into the early 1950s with a mix of Jewish, African American, and other immigrant communities. However, the middle and upper-class whites of Syracuse soon became alarmed by the influx of new African

American families into the city's center and soon there was a growing political movement to eliminate the "slums" of the 15th Ward (Davis, 2012).

By the mid-1950s, the city found a path towards solving the "problem" of the 15th Ward in the new federal policy of urban renewal. Sponsored by the US Federal Government, urban renewal was a nationwide plan that promised to renovate the decaying areas of the nation's urban areas with federal dollars to help rebuild older housing and provide new more modern public housing. In Syracuse, and indeed much of the nation, this promise was not fulfilled. Around 1955, the plan to begin renovating the 15th Ward was replaced with a two-fold plan to simply remove the residents altogether. On one side, the Upstate Medical University hospital was allowed to expand and replace some of the aging housing stock of the area with medical buildings and parking lots. On the other side, and by far the biggest blow to the 15th Ward was a plan to run the major U.S. Interstate highway, Interstate 81, directly through the city's center. By the early 1960s, what had been the working class neighborhood of the 15th Ward was almost entirely erased by medical buildings on one side and by an enormous interstate overpass on the other.

The residents of the 15th Ward, who has been promised new housing and new resources, were left with only one choice: to move. For those few remaining families who owned their homes, they were compensated for their property. For the vast majority, including most of the African American and immigrant populations, they were provided \$25.00 for relocation and nothing else. The communities who had resided, some for generations, in the city's central district, were scattered across the city's other low income areas with some relocating to the already decaying housing stock of the city's Southside and others to the equally neglected Westside. Crucially, the various formal and informal social networks that had been crucial to the survival of these lower income families were shattered. The churches, community centers, social organizations were also relocated and almost everything that had made the 15th Ward a neighborhood was gone.

This experience was, to return to the key term, traumatic. In the period of a few short years, everything that had made the 15th Ward a community was uprooted and dispersed around the city's edges. Psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove (2016) describes the experience of such upheaval on a community as root shock. As any gardeners here will likely know, if you pull a plant up by its roots and plant it into new soil, the plant will often not survive. Deprived of its native soil the plant will slowly die because it can no

longer find the local nutrients upon which it depended. Fullilove (2016: 22) argues the same thing happens to communities who experience sudden upheaval and relocation. As she argues, “root shock undermines trust, increases anxiety destabilizes relationships, destroys social, emotional, and financial resources, and increases the risk of every kind of stress related disease, from depression to heart attack”.

I entered the scene almost exactly 50 years after the initial announcement that the 15th Ward would be undergoing urban renewal. As the anniversary of the end of the 15th Ward was approaching, a local church that survived the uprooting caused by the hospital and interstate, asked me and a group of students to help commemorate the traumatic end of this community. What began as a 15-week project continued for eight years for me and even longer as the project was taken up by other individuals and organizations. The reason it continued for so long was that the trauma of 1955 was still present in the communities of Syracuse and we soon found that as we worked to find the accounts, testimonies, photos, and artifacts of the 15th Ward, those accounts, testimonies, and objects demanded we go further.

Returning to the main point of this example: we were involved in a rhetorical effort to artistically invent an account of the 15th Ward using the inartistic proofs of the testimonies and memorabilia of those affected. But these testimonies and objects were far more active than mere evidentiary materials –the inartistic proofs of the accounts and documents actively pulled us forward– to speak with more people, to look for more documents, to uncover more troves of photographs and maps.

But, it was not only the accounts and testimonies that called us to continue and deepen the project, the very streets of the city also called to us. The missing buildings, the repurposed synagogues and churches, the former schools and delis and nightclubs urged us to recognize the places where they once stood. As we pursued the project, the city itself seemed haunted with the spirits of those structures and organizations that had once lived and thrived in the spaces now occupied by parking lots and support pillars. We spent time marking these locations, organizing civic activities to acknowledge them, of recalling them into existence amid the remnants of what had been. As we did so the city itself, the inartistic material left behind, became an active participant in not only our research but in calling forth the rhetorical reconstruction of a memory long erased. What we now recognized as the physical scars left by urban renewal demanded that the traumatic wound of the city’s upheaval be recognized, that its story be told. As Joan Ramon Resina (2017: 4) contends, “The traces left by the past in the form of social

relations feel the influence of the environment, of forces and currents that modify both what is remembered and the range and strength of its aftereffects”. We should not underestimate the power of those traces.

Of course, recognizing a lost spirit does not bring it back to life. We did not revive the 15th Ward. But we did work with the remnants of that community to recall it and in recalling that community –its residents, its organizations, its relations, its buildings, its streets– we were able to recast the narrative the city of Syracuse told itself about itself.

And now that memory is becoming relevant once again. That interstate bridge built through the center of Syracuse is coming to the end of its lifespan and the city is engaged in a debate about what should be done. Should it be simply replaced, or rerouted? And, if rerouted, what should be done with the land upon which it sits? In the midst of this debate about the city’s future, the memories of the 15th Ward have become a potent rhetorical resource for those who want to see change in the city’s center. As Alejandra Vitale (2015: 57) has suggested, the memories of the old neighborhood have become “rhetorical-argumentative memories” and provide for a “return and reformulation” of “persuasive strategies used in the past to rally people around an issue”. The memory of an old, vibrant but now lost community has called some in the city to propose revitalizing this space and while there is no way to recreate the community that was traumatically torn apart, there is hope that the city can learn from its past and honor the memory of that community (Samuels, 2019).

CONCLUSION

For the ancients, the fluidity of memory made it frightening. The prospects that memories would shift, perhaps to be forgotten or, more often, to be mis-remembered – animated a great deal of the works related to memory during the Greek and Roman era. And, indeed, we can see a similar anxiety at work in almost every culture in the world. Why would so many civilizations have invested such monumental efforts to mark memories –of individuals, of events, of places– if not out of the ever-present possibility that those individuals, events, and places that were deemed so absolutely important and unforgettable might, in the end, be forgotten. And, pushing the point, why would so many civilizations have taken such pains to not only mark some event or person of the

past but to do so in such particular ways if they were not committed to the person or event not only being remembered but being remembered in a particular manner.

Thought of in this way, we can see memory not simply as an orientation to some past event but as an action –a process by which we seek to reassemble the elements and fragments of our past into something that seems coherent. It is a useful truism in the study of public memory to point out that memory always functions not in the past but in the present –in other words, we are always remembering in the present and for some present purpose. It is perhaps worth recalling here the Latin roots of remember –*memor*: to be mindful and *rememorari*: to call to mind. When we remember we are acting to call to mind fragments of our impression of the past and then, importantly, to transform those fragments into a coherent and persuasive account of that past event.

This transformation, as I've tried to argue, is essentially rhetorical. Just as memory is an act of calling forth an account of the past, so too rhetoric is an act of inventing an account. The crafting of an account, as Aristotle suggested, entails a complex interweaving of invented ideas, concepts, and arguments with the existing materials that serve as evidence. In my talk today, I've tried to suggest that we should avoid privileging either kind of proof –the artistic or inartistic– when thinking about the ways in which accounts of the past are crafted or in the ways they are critiqued and reconceived. Inartistic proofs and materials are not epistemically superior to our narratives or accounts. The city streets of Syracuse's 15th Ward could not speak for themselves without the hard work of community and student activists to craft their account. But, neither are inartistic proofs or materials entirely inert as it was these very streets and remnants that helped to call forth and craft the subsequent rhetorical accounting of their memory.

Rhetorics of memory, especially of traumatic pasts, must engage both the broken narratives and the remnants of these breaks –both the wound and the scar. Only by engaging in such an active process can a new account be formed that allows for healing the past and providing new grounds for a more just future.

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