**Supplementing the Tropes: Poststructuralist Discourse Theory and Rhetorical Political Analysis**

**Alan Finlayson, School of Politics, Philosophy and Area Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.**

**Abstract: This article explores the articulation of poststructuralist Discourse Theory (DT) with Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA). Critical of the ways in which Ernesto Laclau’s ‘rhetorical turn’ reduces rhetoric to the tropes, and to *catachresis* in particular, I argue that tropes involve more than naming and that they must be understood and analysed as parts of larger argumentative propositions. Supportive of the general approach of DT I outline two rhetorical concepts, ‘enthymeme’ and ‘invention’ which can contribute to the critical analysis of the discursive terrain of politics. RPA, I argue, refocuses our attention on the forms of political agency and action which take place in specific and particular situations, in ways which are also of value to the formation of political strategies.**

**Key words: Laclau, Political Discourse Theory, Rhetorical Political Analysis, Catachresis, Enthymeme**

**Supplementing the Tropes: Political Discourse Theory and Rhetorical Political Analysis**

**Introduction**

Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (DT) is one of the most sophisticated and fruitful approaches to the contemporary study of political language and ideology. Its development and refinement have been enhanced by a pluralistic relationship to themes, terms and practices from other ‘traditions’ or ‘schools’ of discourse analysis (as well as from yet wider approaches in Communications and Media Studies), even as it retains a core poststructuralist ontological orientation (see De Cleen at al, 2021a). In a 2009 review, leading figures of DT compared their approach to language and politics with a variety of others, identifying how they could ‘in principle be combined in some respects’ (Glynos et al. 2009, 36) but also how they vary in terms of ontology, focus and purpose. They argued that one of these, Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA), is complementary with DT, sharing the presupposition that the ‘discursive terrain…forms the ultimate horizon for the constitution of social objectivity’ but noted that RPA tends, in contrast to DT, to ‘focus more on the micro level’ (2009, 34).

In this article I argue for greater articulation of RPA with DT. I explain why, for theoretical and political reasons, RPA tends to a certain ‘micro’ level, and why this ought to be considered a strength. I then outline two rhetorical concepts – enthymeme and invention – which, I argue, are significant for others engaged in the theorisation and analysis of political language and discourse, especially those sympathetic to DT. I begin by returning to Laclau’s ‘rhetorical turn’: his identification of ‘rhetoricity’ with the tropological (with figures of speech), and of one trope in particular – catachresis, the use of a name for something in a formally inappropriate way - as the essence of all rhetoric. This, I show, obscures the wider range of persuasive strategies characteristic of rhetoric, and of significance for comprehending and analysing (as well as undertaking) rhetorical political action. In attending to the ‘macro-level of analysis, focusing on social practices and regimes, and motivated by a critical explanatory drive that foregrounds questions of ontology’ (Glynos, et al. 2021, 64) any form of discourse analysis risks losing sight of the specificity and particularity of political moments.

Analysis necessarily and rightly tends to the classification and categorisation of events and phenomena. Political action, however, proceeds from an understanding of the singular nature of its situations. This is not to reject the ontology of DT but, rather, to stress the value of rich accounts of what happens at the ‘ontic’ level (see Griggs and Howarth (2023); Howarth et al. (2022); Glynos et al. (2023)). The value of such work lies in the fact that analyses of concrete situations can highlight opportunities for specific kinds of tactical action, expanding our understanding of, and capacity for, political-discursive action. That action goes beyond the formation of empty signifiers understood as the primary objects of political identification and as most significantly manifested through ‘the construction of a people’ (Laclau 2006, 656). The latter may be neither possible nor necessary at all points or in all struggles; a range of other kinds of rhetorical action matter for radical politics. One way forward for such rich accounts is to articulate the concepts and tools of DT with those of RPA. We can do that through attention to what rhetoricians call enthymemes (including their connection to *catachresis* and other tropes), and to the kind of political-rhetorical agency captured by the concept of ‘invention’ (which I explain below). A key effect of this supplement is the foregrounding of the particularity of political situations and of the potential for political action within them.

**Rhetoric in Laclau: From a Restricted to a General Account**

In the preface to *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* Laclau proposes conceiving of Plato's allegory of the cave - the unfortunate inhabitants of which connect voices to the shadows they see before them - as a theory of articulation. He writes: ‘Common sense discourse, *doxa*, is presented as a system of misleading articulations in which concepts do not appear linked by inherent logical relations but are bound together simply by connotative or evocative links which custom and opinion have established between them’ (1977, 7).

Two things are of especial interest in this passage in which we already see indications of how Laclau’s theorisation would develop. The first is that his presentation of the allegory is clearly informed not only by the text of *Republic* but by Plato’s general critique of Rhetoric, especially as found in *Gorgias.* There it is denigrated as speech which fails to climb up to the light of truth (to clarify the meaning of terms through dialectic) instead stepping down into the common sense of the *demos*, adapting to the non-necessary meaning of the terms and concepts found there. Laclau is also clearly informed by the later explications of Aristotle who most clearly identified rhetoric as working on and with *doxa* understood as practical, everyday, customary usage. At this early stage Laclau is clearly familiar with the rhetorical tradition of thinking. Yet the word ‘rhetoric’ (or ‘rhetorical’) occurs only six times in that book and in each case its usage relies on the negative connotations of ‘rhetoric’ as superficial, emotional or misleading (Laclau, 1977, 101, 106, 108, 121, 166, 178).

Secondly, and relatedly, Laclau’s concern here (as always) is not only theoretical but linked to matters of political action and strategy. Indeed, his overall concern is that, on the basis of a certain theory of ideology, Marxist theory (and thus socialist political practice) is not able to understand the articulation between abstract and concrete. “Capitalist” for example is a concept specifying a place within the relationships constitutive of the capitalist mode of production yet the agents in that position are ‘at the same time the points of intersection of a multiplicity of relations and contradictions…in political discourse it is not the “capitalist as such” which is present but concrete capitalists’ (1977, 11). According to Laclau the term ‘capitalist’ is thus connotatively linked to others; it is not a theoretical concept but a name which ‘alludes’ to that ensemble. Marxism, in seeking to make all this paradigmatic (rather than connotative), through reliance on class reductionism, has not attended to problems of political discourse but simply insisted on the necessary class character of all relations hindering understanding of the ‘actual historical variety of bourgeois ideologies’ (1977, 11). This anticipates what *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* would call ‘the primacy of the political’, and the argument that socialist practice limits itself if it thinks that things are or will necessarily resolve into proper class relations without need for discursive articulation. In short, here, in identifying doxa as ‘common sense discourse’ and ‘what we would call today ideological discourse’ Laclau constitutes doxa not as a philosophical problem to be overcome – purified by philosophical discourse and reorganised as ‘essential paradigmatic relations’ - but as a field of political action and contestation.

The achievement here is to have reconstituted politics and political action as objects of analysis to be understood as not only functions of, or dependent on, something more fundamental but as themselves fundamental, and to be understood using concepts generated by that analysis (which Laclau developed throughout his writing, alongside Mouffe). However, while this early work had opened up the possibility, he would not fully articulate his approach with the rhetorical tradition, nor make use of most of its terms and tools in his theory or analysis. He would develop the theory of *doxa* by proxy, using analogous concepts such as ‘common sense’ (in the Gramscian manner) and ‘sedimentation’ (taken from Husserl) while restricting himself to rhetorical terms taken from twentieth-century literary theory.

Laclau’s interests were primarily philosophical and ontological. He sought to show that ‘the social’ is constituted by ‘the political’, by contestation and antagonism, power and exclusion, a condition of possibility for which is the tropological dimension of language. A longstanding criticism of such ontological approaches to politics is that, as Marchart summarises, they are prone to ‘excessive abstraction at the cost of sociological concretion and political engagement’ (2018, 12). Defenders would argue that, on the contrary, Laclau’s political ontology helps us to see the politics of social orders and formations, and thus to avoid the reduction – the paradoxical depoliticising – of politics to something else. As Marchart puts it: ‘Sensitised by such an ontology, social analysis will be prompted to search for modes of the political in the most unexpected places’ (2018, 12). This is a good defence. Nevertheless, we must still ask, having grasped its ontological sources and found it in unexpected places, how do we ‘do’ politics? That requires ‘sociological concretion’ and engagement with political specifics.

Here, Rhetoric can help us. It is, and always was, a name for the theory and practice of contestation on, through and within doxa or common-sense discourse.The approach to political language inaugurated by Aristotle and refined by Cicero, Quintilian, and other Romans, was fundamentally practical. Conscious of the need to focus on the particularity of political communities, situations and strategies, it observes and identifies the ways and means of rhetorical action in the polis, classifying and systematising them, not forphilosophical reasons but with a view to learning how to do it well (or how to teach it to others), and attending to far more than the metaphors which form the focus of Laclau’s analyses.

For Aristotle, the ‘essential’ nature of the art of rhetoric was not tropes and figures but ‘the modes of persuasion’, understood as kinds of ‘demonstration’ which, taking the form of arguments centred on probabilities and potentialities in particular situations, draw directly on *doxa*. His justification for the analysis of this was that it was useful in the life of the polis: in courts bad speakers might cause judges to make false and unjust decisions; in public life audiences may not possess exact knowledge and so in our arguments we have to use ‘notions possessed by everybody’; and ‘it is absurd to hold that a man ought to be ashamed of being unable to defend himself with his limbs, but not of being unable to defend himself with speech and reason’ (*Rhetoric*, 1, 1). From this perspective, and *contra* Plato and his cave, Rhetoric doesn’t simply connect voices to shadows. It points out to the one who thinks that they have left the cave, that if they want to go back in and get the others out they will look like a blind and stumbling fool – and be vulnerable to attack - if they don’t explain their discovery in a way which connects to (is articulated with) the discourse of shadows which ‘everybody knows’. Plato, of course, didn’t think Philosophers should have to stoop so low and that they should stay in the sunshine. Those who do Politics are always fighting in darkness lit by flickering fire.

This usefulness comes at a seeming cost. Rhetoric appears to sacrifice strict universality or generalisability for particularity. It is, in Aristotle’s definition, the ability of identifying the ‘*available* means of persuasion in *particular* situations’ (*Rhetoric*, 1.1.2 my emphasis). That is to say, it doesn’t seek words, techniques or strategies that will work always and anywhere. It starts from the situation understood as and through its particularity, a contingent and unique configuration of elements: goals and strategies; issues and problems; audiences with specific and contradictory interests, and varied ways of apprehending them (see also Bitzer 1968). It does not assume that in any situation we will always find the means to implement any particular persuasive strategy. On the contrary only some will be available. We must find them and then work out what can be done.

This particularity has meant that there is, in Rhetoric, a potential resistance to theorisation. In its place we find the proliferation of classes and categories of tropes, and schemes and arrangements which can at times be tedious or comic: Erasmus famously offered some one-hundred and fifty ways of signing off a letter. Yet this can be theoretically justified. Rhetoric, as the American rhetorician Kenneth Burke put it, is concerned with ‘opinion in the moral order of *action* rather than in the scenic order of *truth*’ (1969, 54). That is not to say that it is unconcerned with truth but that it is brought into being by the need or desire to make something happen, and by the possibility of using discourse to alter reality, ‘through the mediation of thought and action’ (Bitzer 1968, 4), connecting probable truths with possible actions and ‘moving’ people to enact them*.* The underlying thought here is that, as it were, particularity and specificity is the generalisable truth of political situations, the plurality or multiplicity of which is such that none can be understood through the application of a rule external to them. There is no detour which avoids the particular; only through it can we find and apply a rule, the use of which could change the situation in which we find ourselves. In this respect Rhetoric is not anti-theoretical but a practical theory of intervention into concrete political situations (and it always foregrounds the latter). From this perspective, the primacy of the political is also the primacy of the particular and of the action through which it becomes known and changed. The truths with which politics and rhetoric are concerned, then, are those which will come to be if the rhetorical performative is felicitous, and if, by inspiring action, it gives rise to a new and different situation. For this, what one needs is not only a conceptualisation of the ontological nature of situations and events but also some clues as to where to find those means of persuasion, the variety of things one might be able to do; to curtail the lists of the tropes, schemes and other possibilities for argument – as Laclau may seem to do - is to limit the range of possible actions before we have looked for them.

In the rhetorical tradition, then, rhetorical action is at the centre of analysis. Laclau’s focus was elsewhere: on the ontological nature of rhetoricity as ‘a condition of signification’ (2014, 66). Consequently, his highly informative analyses also tended to lose specificity and context and to become examples of (and metaphors for) general theoretical claims: Peronism, the Sorelian General Strike and so on. In an exchange with Butler (in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*) Laclau says, in a fairly typical formulation, that ‘any political action – a strike, a speech, an election, the assertion of its right by an oppressed group – involves the subversion of meaning, the displacement of what was ‘fixated within the horizon of an ensemble of institutionalised practices’ and that ‘this movement is tropological inasmuch as the displacement is not governed by any necessary logic dictated by what is being displaced’ (Butler, Laclau and Zizek 2000, 78). That’s fine in theory. But in practice the strike, speech, election and rights-claim take place in very particular situations; their precise form, and likelihood of success, is the outcome of decisions both partially determined and markedly limited by characteristics of that situation, as well as by what Laclau theorises as a ‘logic’, a ‘system of objects, “grammar” or cluster of rules which make some combinations and sub­stitutions possible and exclude others’ (2000, 76). From the perspective of rhetoric what must be brought to the fore is the interplay of rhetorical action with unique situations and the whole range of means of persuasion thought to work because of their congruence with a logic (or what we would call *doxa*).

In short, as Kaplan has lamented, though he did much to theorise rhetoricity Laclau did not develop a fully elaborated conception of rhetoric (2010, 254-5). His reduction of it to catachresis ‘deprives him of any way to transform rhetorical ontology into ontic rhetorical practice’ (2010, 267). As the theory of hegemony became more entwined with theories of the ‘literariness of the literary’ in texts (Laclau 2001, 79) so it became concerned with the latter’s distinct artistic or aesthetic as opposed to sociological or historical characteristics; political action was detached from the concrete strategic manoeuvres characteristic of contending parties in a war of position, in a specific moment and hegemony nothing other than ‘metonymic displacements based on relations of contiguity’ (Laclau 2014, 89) held in place, or totalised, by a heterogeneous element, a catachrestical name of ‘the people’. The conceptual vocabulary attendant on this conception is, certainly, powerful: antagonism and antagonistic frontiers (how collective identifications also involve the introduction of an exclusion, a specification of who/what we are not); chains of equivalence (through which otherwise distinct terms and identities are constituted as sharing something in common), ‘the social demand’ (Laclau 2005, 73) and its universalisation (see also Laclau 2014, chapter 7). But that vocabulary can also be limiting with little to say about how a name came to be dominant or why it was effective in a particular situation. These are questions which can only be answered by attention to context, the wider rhetorical situation and the actions of agents within it. Yet Laclau seems to push it beyond analysis: the decision is ungrounded, a moment of madness, ‘a complex situation whose mechanisms—largely unconscious—escape the ‘subject’ of the decision’ (Laclau 2004, 307) and part of logics which ‘involve figural embodiments resulting from a *creatio ex nihilo…’* (2006, 653). Again, while we may agree with this in so far as it is an affirmation of a claim about the radical contingency and structural undecidabilityof discourse, if we want to understand any *particular* situation, to learn from it what might be done in another, then we need to consider the concrete agents in that situation, and the contexts – the *doxa* - which made some courses of action more or less possible and more or less likely to succeed. In this respect I agree with Butler’s worry that Laclau’s approach separates ‘the formal analysis of language from its cultural and social syntax and semantics’ (2000, 34), as if particular formations are just instances of a general ‘non-contextual truth about language itself’. In contrast, she avers, claims ‘always takes place in a given syntax, through a certain set of cultural conventions in a recognizable venue’ and if they work it is because they are translated into ‘the various rhetorical and cultural contexts in which the meaning and force of universal claims are made…no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm’ (2000, 35).

My point, then, is simply that the ontological conditions of possibility for rhetorical political action do not themselves account for the specific form or content of any specific instance of such action, nor can we derive from them what means we might use ‘in any particular situation’. That requires analysis of the situation including of the ‘cultural and social syntax and semantics’ which limit what can successfully be said, but which also contain opportunities for action and which, in reiterating cultural norms, may also subvert and change them. This is why RPA is so focused on the ‘micro’ level. Rhetorical action takes a variety of forms. We cannot say in advance which is most significant. Yet political and policy analysts often choose to elevate one linguistic action of these above all others: framing or ‘heresthetic’ (e.g. Riker 1986), narrative (e.g. Bevir and Rhodes 2007; Hajer 1997), problematisation (e.g. Bacchi 2009, 2015) while linguists, employing CDA and DHA, tend to foreground the ethical evaluation of speech actions according to criteria formed independent of those actions and the political situations which induced them (e.g. Fairclough and Fairclough 2012). When it comes to formulating practical political strategies, however, we cannot and should not reduce our options to these, nor to catachresis and the formation of antagonistic frontiers. In political life all of these are always just one element of larger ensembles of potential rhetorical action in particular rhetorical situations. To them we can add the varied appeals foregrounded by the rhetorical tradition (to different kinds of character or forms of interpellation, to varied emotions and so on) and varied kinds of quasi-rational appeal called enthymemes. I want here to focus first on the latter, and, later, on the rhetorical activity of ‘invention’.

**Enthymeme**

For Aristotle the distinctive form of rhetorical demonstration, ‘the body’ of persuasion, was the enthymeme, a form of quasi-logical reasoning which, eschewing the formal purity of the syllogism, incorporates propositions familiar to an audience: *doxa* (*Rhetoric* 1357a). A simple example is the Conservative Party slogan, used in the 1959 UK General Election: “Life is better with the Conservatives. Don't let Labour ruin it”. The slogan implicitly proposes a quasi-logical claim in the form of a syllogism: when Conservatives are in power life is good; when Labour are in power life is worse; therefore, if Labour get elected life will be worse. In the context most people would have understood that this was invoking the economic situation (specifically the challenges of post-war austerity and the benefits of a recent boom). Thus, the slogan is ultimately proposing that “Labour ruins the economy”. That proposition is never stated. But for the slogan to make sense audiences must assume it, naturalising it as something which ‘everybody’ knows.

In enthymemes, as Bitzer puts it, ‘the speaker does not *lay down* his premises but lets his audience supply them out of its stock of opinion and knowledge’ (Bitzer 1959, 187): a particular proposition is articulated with some more general part of doxa (or common sense), the concrete with the abstract (where the abstract is the vague notions expressed in a ‘social syntax’). Common sense is neither stable nor uniform, however. In Zerilli’s (2005) evocative phrase it is ‘not a static concept grounded in eternal truths but a creative force that generates our sense of reality’. It is a raw material which political discourse mines, refines and puts to use. If successful, enthymemes unite speaker and audience such that ‘the audience itself helps construct the proofs by which it is persuaded’ (Bitzer 1959, 188). Here, rhetoric forms a hermeneutic circle; a rhetor ‘finds’ in an audience’s understanding a source of potential argumentative premises and returns these to them in the form of an application to a specific case in a specific argumentative context. We might understand our example of Conservative Party sloganeering as constituting a metaphor: Labour catachrestically becomes a name for economic mismanagement. But if this is so, it is only as part of a more general rhetorical action which includes the statements and arguments surrounding the slogan, the way it is delivered, the representation of data, examples and so on. Furthermore, the ‘goal’ of the slogan is particular: to secure votes and win a specific election. To do that it creates a more general proposition (that Labour means economic mismanagement) which it asks voters to apply to the present situation. In so doing, that proposition is created/affirmed as part of *doxa* (and so made available for future rhetorical action). But we cannot explain the slogan with reference to this effect. It is the movement between particular and general, of which the action consists, which matters.

The point, then, is that – as Laclau has shown – names matter *but* they matter most when they function as part of an invitation to audiences to make a particular inference, and not only as mythical placeholders for the universal with which subjects unconsciously identify. Consequently, analysis, rather than ascending to the mythical heavens, should go down into the earthy details of political discourse, exploring how signifiers work as parts of larger argumentative actions, digging with the analytical and conceptual tools provided by Rhetoric. Here we can turn to a second, more complex and extended illustration.

Over the last fifty years or so the application of the word/concept ‘violence’ has expanded such that it can now refer to psychological as well as physical harms, can be agentless, ‘indirect’ or ‘structural’, and manifested in imbalances of the distribution of resources and so on (e.g. Galtung 1969). That expansion, created to serve analytical purposes in a certain liberal theoretical discourse, enables the term to work enthymematically, in the way we saw in our example of Conservative Party rhetoric. ‘Violence’ is a powerful word, rich in implication and connotation. It is reasonable to assume that ‘most people’ consider violence to be by definition ‘a bad thing’, an intrusion into the presumed stability of peaceful civic life. It can thus be used in an enthymeme to shift the weight of argument from proving that some particular phenomenon is ‘bad’ or ‘unjust’ to proving that it is ‘violence’, on the basis that if it is shown to be so then people will infer that, indeed, it is ‘bad’ or ‘unjust’.

For instance: protestors might call for opposition to the arms trade on the basis that supplying arms is just as much violence as using them; activists might try to convince us to refrain from purchasing ‘fast fashion’ because it supports the ‘structural violence’ of employment practices in the garment trade; representatives of minority groups might call for legislation to ensure the provision of multilingual council services because this will help to reduce the ‘violence’ of cultural exclusion. In these cases ‘violence’ is being used in a metaphorical way, changing how we apprehend a phenomena, and we might call it an example of catachresis: a signifier with no essential meaning is being applied to name a phenomenon in a hitherto unusual way. But to focus analysis on this point is to misrepresent the discursive action which does not consist of the name alone. It works as part of an enthymeme, a larger chain of argument concerning some course of action we might pursue. The implicit primary proposition – to be supplied by the audience - is that violence is wrong and must be stopped. The second – proposed by the protestors, activists and representatives, is that some particular thing – the arms trade, fast fashion or cultural exclusion – is an instance of violence. The conclusion – for all to draw - is that ‘therefore’ we must protest against, stop or prevent the violent thing. Furthermore, for this to be convincing, the entailments of the concept of violence are insufficient. Indeed, over-reliance on these could be counter-productive if, in going against expectations shaped by *doxa*, the claims seems excessive. The figure – the catachrestical use of ‘violence’ – can support the larger argument only if that larger argument supports and validates that catachrestical use. Thus, for example, a rhetorician arguing against the arms trade, fast fashion or cultural exclusion will not only name these phenomena as violent but represent them in a way which emphasises their ‘violence’: painting a verbal picture of employment conditions for garment workers and of the harms wrought by unregulated and unsafe working conditions; using emotive and evaluative language such as ‘brutal’, ‘inhuman’ or ‘unconscionable’. Those descriptions will be further bolstered by bringing in factual evidence: examples, details of people harmed in this way, direct testimony or quotation from them.

As the rhetoricians Chaim Perlman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca have shown, ‘a given figure, recognisable by its structure does not always produce the same effect in argumentation’ (Perlman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 172). Thus, they differentiate figures not by *structure* (as Laclau does) but by *effects*. For example, tropes of definition – of the sort we are considering here – may ‘make use of the structure of a definition not to give the meaning of a word but to bring to the fore certain aspects of the facts which might otherwise remain in the background of our consciousness’ (1969, 172). That is to say, what matters in calling the arms-trade ‘violent’ isn’t just catachrestical naming but how that name brings to the fore a part of the whole: it displaces, say, the economic effects of the trade (the numbers employed, the value of the tax revenue it provides), or the defensive use of weapons, and brings to our attention the injuries they cause. Conversely, language which develops and illustrates that displacement will help make the name more convincing.

What matters here is how a trope of definition links something to extant evaluative categories. For instance, the historian of political thought Quentin Skinner has emphasised the importance of the trope of *paradiastole* or redescription which, making use of the ‘neighbourliness’ of moral terms, seeks to move something from one moral category to another bringing about its re-evaluation (such as when the recklessness of a business decision is celebrated as entrepreneurial innovation). In describing the failure to provide multilingual services as cultural exclusion and as ‘violent’ we invite people to see it in a different moral light: it isn’t being ‘efficient’, nor is it a simple oversight; it is an action which causes direct harm and for which, therefore, people should be held accountable. This is not simply a matter of applying a word, nor only of re-naming, but of combining naming with description and emphasis, shaping the choice put before an audience.

A complement to such description is figures of ‘presence’ which ‘make the object of discourse present to the mind’ (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 174). These include verbal schemes and stylistic choices which are not often thought of as figures: onomatopoeia, repetitions, amplifications, the use of direct speech. We might, for example, describe the sale of cluster bombs not only as ‘violent’ but as ‘destructive, brutal, traumatising’, and as well as enumerate injuries incorporate the emotive force of words said by victims and medics. Another example is figures of ‘communion’, which increase the connection between an audience, and between an audience and speaker. Quotations, for example, may be used as a kind of evidence, a sort of witness testimony, or as a proof from authority; they are also a way of enhancing communion, showing that speaker and audience all esteem or venerate a certain person, share a literary or historical reference and so on (for examples see Atkins and Finlayson 2016). The same effect can be achieved through the use of shared references, such as allusions, and may also be part of the force of analogies and other metaphorical expressions. For example, we could bring home to our audience the violence of fast fashion by connecting what might seem distant – textile factories in a country a long way away, staffed by people we do not know – with something close: the high-street shops ‘we all go to’ or ‘our’ workplaces and the regulations which protect ‘us’ from employers. Yet another example is techniques which directly involve an audience, such as rhetorical questions (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 176-8). Posing a question such as ‘how would you feel if your clothes had blood on them?’ prompts an audience to begin thinking about things in a very particular way, whilst opening onto a description which enhances ‘presence’.

None of these rhetorical actions is merely ornamental. If attuned to the moment, to the outlook, experiences and references of their audience, they have the effect of making vivid the thing to be considered and decided upon. Nor are they all instances of ‘rhetoricity’ *as such*. They are actions which, if successful, have different and specific effects. To ignore these in analysis, to emphasise the catachrestical use of the name ‘violence’, is to miss most of what is done. In contrast Rhetorical Political Analysis foregrounds rhetorical effects, through which it understands actions, not only their fundamental cause or condition of possibility. The function or force of a trope cannot always be specified in advance of, or apart from, particular instances of its use and the specific ways in which it connects with a range of complementary argumentative forms and strategies. It should be see nnot only as a signifier or name but as part of a strategy of inference used to ‘enable an arguer to connect reasons with conclusions for the purpose of effecting a proof’ (Leff 1983, 25). In distinction to the Laclauian schema, ‘In rhetoric…it is *the proposition and not the term* which emerges as the atomic unit of discourse’ (my emphasis), the overall argumentative action not just one single component.

**Invention**

The strategic development and expression of propositions, connecting particulars and universals in certain ways, arranging arguments such that audiences may draw on ‘doxa’, on sedimented meanings and orientations in ways which might change them, is the quintessence of rhetorical action. That action involves identifying and selecting from all the potential components of an argument available in a particular situation. The name for that in classical rhetoric – for generating potential propositions and potential means of persuasion in particular situations – is ‘invention’. Here the word doesn’t refer to the creation of something novel but to the use of an ‘inventory’, of, as it were, a record or a list of the kinds of arguments that might be made in particular situations. Invention – contrary to what we saw Laclau suggesting (above) is not a *creatio ex nihilo*. It is a search through traditions, common opinions and common sense understood not as the ideologically imposed limit of the sayable but as malleable raw material and as a source for probable claims. That search generates what the contemporary rhetorician Michel Meyer describes as ‘the implicit of the rhetorical transaction, what is presupposed by and in it, and this includes rules and judgments that contribute to the drawing of the inference or the establishment of conclusions in the mind of the audience’ and ‘therefore a link between speaker and audience, at the level of their shared knowledge, singling out what counts in that knowledge, its ground for their exchanges’ (2014, 448-9).

To invent is to sit at the nexus of argument, issue, and community which constitute the rhetorical situation, and to find there the approach (potentially) most suited to it. Exploring common patterns of argument and common senses of the good, bad, unworthy, advantageous, disadvantageous, wealth, reputation, honour, courage, justice, security, and so on, the rhetorical actor seeks ways to articulate a specific issue or controversy in order to invite a particular judgment of a particular audience. They then seek to find the right arrangement for that argument, a ‘narrative’ of facts and situations, and the best or most appropriate words to engage and hold the attention, to make things vivid, to ‘prove, please and persuade’. Invention is, as it were, a machine for connecting the generality of propositions to the specifics of causes or cases, combining signification with force, transforming propositions into ‘an array of responses and effects’, performing and instantiating universal concepts in particular contexts (Muckelbauer 2009). That action requires the rhetor not to mistake such things for a ‘method’, in the sense of a straightforwardly replicable strategy, or as derived from a body of knowledge with meaning, force or function apart from the specific situations in which it is used. ‘Political thought’ takes place in political situations which are prior to it, even as it tries, in thinking the situation, to act within and upon it. It thus requires what we might call ‘fidelity to the particular’, attentiveness to the elements in play; an orientation learned through understanding general themes derived from numerous examples, but which must not obscure the singularity of political situations if it is to act within them. Invention, then, is a fundamental art of politics. RPA, informed by DA, provides the means for the critical appreciaton of that art.

**Conclusion**

In the analysis (or execution) of political discourse we should not limit our understanding to catachresis, to tropes or, indeed, to any single set of operations. We should make use of the range of rhetorical possibilities. Howarth once remarked that for Poststructuralist Discourse Theory an issue has always been its application, moving from abstract to specific and ‘avoiding the difficulties surrounding the mechanical application of “formal-abstract” theory to “real-concrete” events and processes’ (2005, 316): this has sometimes been called a ‘methodological deficit’. RPA is a way of addressing this issue, partly – and simply – because it provides an extensive vocabulary, beyond the tropes, for understanding political argumentation. It also seeks to contribute to a ‘practice turn’, to a focus on how political arguments and expressions are ‘done’ in concrete contexts made up of particular issues and audiences with the resources of a particular doxa at hand (see De Cleen et al., 2024). In common with other approaches to the analysis of political language, such as CDA and DHA, Rhetoric seeks to compensate for DT’s abstraction and to attend to the details of specific moments. However, RPA retains from DT a primary focus on the *politics* of language rather than the *language* of politics (see also Fairclough and Fairclough, 2013; Finlayson, 2013; Hay, 2013; Finlayson, 2018; Wodak, 2018). It is first and foremost a discursive reading of politics and not just a form of linguistic analysis (De Cleen et al. 2021b, 126) and its ultimate concern, both underlying and overriding, is not evaluative critique of the kind that drives CDA and DHA but action: the identification of possible strategies and the enhancement of ‘inventive’ capacity.

This is also why DA is important for RPA. As De Cleen et al. affirm DT ‘is firmly situated in the fields of democratic theory and political theory more broadly’ and concerned with theorizing the nature of politics and democracy’ (2021a, 23). RPA too is ultimately a way of conceiving of some of the actions of which democratic life is composed, of analysing them and – crucially - of practicing them. Thus RPA offers a particular *emphasis*. It is the nature of Rhetoric to attend to the moment and conjuncture over the ontology of the social, and to the creative agency of political-rhetorical actors. As Mouffe (2018) stresses, citing Machiavelli, political thinking is always situated ‘in’ a conjuncture, rather than reflecting “over” it’. Here ‘conjuncture’ refers to a specific historic situation, a particular relationship between domains or levels of social practice (economic, cultural, or ideological for instance) and, as Hall puts it, the ‘accumulation of the different contradictions, peculiar to each of the levels or practices, *in one space or moment*’ (Hall 2021, 86 my emphasis). Such ‘moments’ should not be neglected in favour of the conjuncture or its ontological conditions of possibility. A goal of *political* analysis is the understanding of moments and of how to act within them. Machiavelli conceived of these as *occasione* when *fortuna* and the *virtu* of political actors might meet and make something new. A complementary Greek term, common in the rhetorical tradition, is *kairos* referring to (in contrast to uniform, chronological time), the ‘timely’ moment of opportunity which one must be able to recognise in order to seize. This is the time of rhetorical action though, of course, its effects can be disseminated (to use a Derridean term) in complex ways, in the form of definitions, redefinitions, argumentative elements and new components of *doxa* providing resources for hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic, challenge. Althusser once argued, quite rightly, that ‘in political, ideological and philosophical struggle’ words are ‘weapons, explosives or tranquillizers and poisons’ and that sometimes ‘class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word’ (1971, 21). But sometimes is not all the time, and one word only works because it is articulated with others.

In addition to vocabulary and emphasis, RPA also offers some gentle pushback on aspects of DT. Primary amongst these is that identity is not always the centre of political discourse, not even radical political discourses, and that the movement of such discourses is not always from the particular – this or that demand – to the general or universal – the demand to make present an absent fullness. If we understand ‘chains of equivalence’ as establishing similarity between terms or identities along a ‘horizontal’ axis, we can see how rhetoric often connects things ‘vertically’. As we have seen with our example of ‘violence’ presence, examples, quotations and so on are forms of definition and redescription which connect generals with particulars and vice-versa (especially in ‘routine’ forms of politics involving the justification of specific policy positions and actions). Here there is an ebb and flow between abstract and concrete which I have elsewhere characterised in the terms of Roman rhetorical practice as a movement between general ‘*quaestiones*’, debatable points, and particular ‘*causae*’ or cases; between general controversies (is war ever justified?) and specific cases (should we go to war now?). Philosophy privileges the former. Politics is lived in the latter, in contingent and fluid circumstances in which we don’t get to choose the cases before us and dispute often centres on the category to which a particular issue should be assigned, not the name of a people.

From this perspective we might see how particular forms of politics are in part distinguished by the ways in which they characteristically orient themselves to general and particular, to cases and to questions. For example, I would suggest that it is characteristic of ‘conservative’ discourse to start with cases and then show how they exemplify or embody a mystical universal (or a universal ‘evil’); it is characteristic of liberal discourses to start with a universal value and show how some particular instance embodies or violates it. In such situations ‘the construction of a people’ may be at stake. In my own work I have shown how versions of Englishness or Britishness are in play in the rhetorics of the ideological formations labelled Thatcherism and Blairism. Yet sometimes the weight of the argument is not on the construction of the people but on the use of a construction to justify a particular proposition. To emphasise the former over the latter can be – in specific instances – to mistake the figure for the ground. Politics is not always the subsumption of an identity into what Laclau understands as the mythical fullness of a name holding the place of the universal.

It may be objected that, taken a step further, this becomes a kind of anti-theory position, dissolving all concepts and generalities into an endless series of particularities and flows about which nothing can be said. This is a charge often made against Discourse Theory, just as versions of it have long been made against Rhetoric. Here is a metaphor to help us think through the point. A tennis player does not need to know the full justification of theorems of aerodynamics to be able to hit the ball where they intend. However, to stop there in our analysis of tennis is to embrace a form of pragmatist thinking which in politics might entail using whatever Rortyan sentimental story works without much need to look deeper. This is not the position of RPA. Conversely, one who knows and understands fully all of the theorems of aerodynamics is not thereby necessarily able to hit a tennis ball in any particular direction. To think that they can is to fall into a disabling form of theoreticism (which in politics leads to the demand that the world be remade to fit our theories). Radical theory (including DT and RPA) refuses this dichotomy but does not transcend it. It dwells in the movement between abstract and concrete, conscious that these change over time and do so in part because of what we do to articulate them. However, there is here a risk that when we find a strategy, the way to hit an ace right down the centre line, we lose sight of – and skill in – all the other moves we need to be practised in if we are to have a chance of winning the game. To extend this analogy perhaps too far we might say that RPA, like other approaches, is sometimes a commentator on, or a historian of, the game. It is never the umpire. It can be something of a theorist but what it seeks to be above all is the player because it is only the player who, in the end, makes a difference to the outcome.

The development of a relationship between RPA and DT, supplements to each other, is a potential way forward, and part of a broader practice turn (De Cleen, 2024), for the study of political discourse. That would not consist only in more ‘micro’ analyses, of which we have plenty. It would also concern political practice. If Poststructuralist Discourse Theory or the ‘logics’ approach is concerned with ‘the purposes, rules and ontological presuppositions that render a practice or regime possible, intelligible, and vulnerable’ (Glynos et al. 2009, 11), then Rhetorical Political Analysis can be positioned as focusing on the more particular and practical goal of helping us to identify some things to say and do, some ways of being inventive given the concrete social-historical limits on political discourse at any one moment, and on the opportunities for going beyond them in specific situations. That is to say, RPA is interested in applications to political life and - a pragmatic ambition - with the identification of potential strategies for rhetorical intervention into what we would prefer to call ‘particular situations’ rather than the ‘micro-level’. We might say that it emphasises ‘socialist strategy’ rather than ‘hegemony’ (which does not mean rejecting the latter). This entails attention to the capacity of agents to be ‘inventive’ and to how various linguistic means form enthymemes, interacting in various ways with the *doxa* which constrains them yet which they also reshape. That ability – which we might also call the skilled development and deployment of discursive practices - is definitive of political action. Systematically identifying its manifestations is a necessary part of political analysis. But critique is ultimately a practical activity the value or truth of which is only known afterwards if its discourse – such as this perhaps – has been effective.

**Bibliography**

Althusser, Louis. 1971. “Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon”. In Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays.* Monthly Review Press.

Atkins, Judi., & Finlayson, Alan. 2016. “’As Shakespeare so Memorably Said…’: Quotation, Rhetoric, and the Performance of Politics”. *Political Studies* 64: 164-181.

Bacchi, Carole. 2009. *Analysing Policy: What’s the Problem Represented to Be?* Pearson.

Bevir, Mark. and Rhodes, Rod A. W. 2007. *Governance Stories*.Routledge.

Bitzer, Lloyd. 1968. “The Rhetorical Situation”. *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1(1): 1-14

Burke, Kenneth. 1969. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. University of California Press.

Butler, Judith., Laclau, Ernesto. and Zizek, Slavoj. 2000. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Verso Books.

De Cleen, Benjamin. Glynos, Jason, Goyvaerts, Jana and Stavrakakis, Yannis. 2024. “The Turn to Practice in Discourse Theory: Lessons from the Populist Moment.” *Journal of Language and Politics.*

De Cleen. Benjamin. Goyvaerts, Jana. Carpentier, Nico. Glynos, Jason. Stavrakakis, Yannis. (2021b). “Moving discourse theory forward: A five-track proposal for future research.” *Journal of Language and Politics*, 20: 22-46.

Fairclough, Isabella., & Fairclough, Norman. 2012. *Political Discourse Analysis: A Method for Advanced Students*. Routledge.

Fairclough, Isabella., & Fairclough, Norman. (2013). “Argument, Deliberation, Dialectic and the Nature of the Political: A CDA Perspective”. *Political Studies Review*, *11*(3): 336-344.

Finlayson, Alan. 2013. “Critique and Political Argumentation.” *Political Studies Review*, *11*(3): 313-320.

Finlayson, Alan. 2018. ‘“Dancing with Doxa”: A ‘Rhetorical Political Analysis’ of David Cameron’s Britishness’. In ‘Doing Politics’: Discursivity, performativity and mediation in political discourse edited by Geraldine Horan and Michael Kranert. John Benjamins.

Galtung, Johan. 1969. “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”. *Journal of Peace Research* 6(3): 167-191.

Glynos Jason, Howarth, David. Flitcroft, Ryan. Love, Craig. Rousos, Konstantinos and Vazquez, Jimena. 2021. “Logics, discourse theory and methods: Advances, challenges and ways forward”. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 20(1): 62 - 78

Glynos, Jason and Roussos, Konstantinos and Voutyras, Savvas and Warren, Rebecca. 2023. “Paradoxes in the management of timebanks in the UK’s voluntary sector: discursive bricolage and its limits”. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 34 (3): 486-496.

Glynos, Jason,. Howarth David., Norval, Aletta., Speed, Ewen. 2009. *Discourse Analysis: Varieties and Methods*, National Centre for Research Methods NCRM/014 (<https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/796/1/discourse_analysis_NCRM_014.pdf>)

Griggs, Steven., and Howarth, David. 2023. *Contesting Aviation Expansion: Depoliticisation, Technologies of Government and Post-Aviation Futures*. Policy Press.

Hajer, Maaten A. 1997. *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process.* Oxford University Press.

Hall, Stuart. 2021. *Selected Writings on Marxism.* Duke University Press.

Hay, Colin. 2013. “Political Discourse Analysis: The Dangers of Methodological Absolutism.” *Political Studies Review*, *11*(3): 321-327.

Howarth, David. 2005. “Applying Discourse Theory”. In *Discourse Theory in European Politics* edited by David Howarth and Jacob Torfing. Palgrave Macmillan.

Howarth, David., Barnett, Neil., Griggs, Steven. and Hall, Stephen. 2022. “Local Agency for the Public Purpose? Dissecting and evaluating the emerging discourses of municipal entrepreneurship in the UK”. *Local Government Studies* 48(5): 907-928.

Kaplan, Michael. 2010.“The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes”. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 43(3): 253-283.

Laclau, Ernesto. 1977. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. New Left Books.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. Verso Books.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2006. “Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics.” *Critical Inquiry*. 32(4): 646–80.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2014. *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. Verso Books.

Leff, Michael C. 1983. “The Topics of Argumentative Invention in Latin Rhetorical Theory from Cicero to Boethius”. *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 1: 23-44.

Marchart, Oliver. 2018. *Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology After Laclau.* Edinburgh University Press

Meyer, Michel (2014) “What is the Use of Topics in Rhetoric?”. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*. 68: 447-262.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2018. *For a Left Populism.* Verso Books.

Riker, William. H. 1986. *The Art of Political Manipulation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Wodak, Ruth. 2018. “We have the character of an island nation”: A discourse-historical analysis of David Cameron’s “Bloomberg speech” on the European Union. In ‘Doing Politics’: Discursivity, performativity and mediation in political discourse edited by Geraldine Horan and Michael Kranert. John Benjamins.

Zerilli, Linda (2005) “‘We Feel Our Freedom’: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt.” *Political Theory*, 33, 2: 158-188.

Bio: Alan Finlayson is Professor of Political & Social Theory at The University of East Anglia.,

Address: School of Politics, Philosophy and Area Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR47TJ, United Kingdom

Orcid ID: 0000-0003-3939-349X