PUBLIC SPEECH, AGORAPHOBIA AND THE APORIA OF "LYING TRULY"

RALPH HEYNDELS

Abstract

This essay endeavours to philosophically interpret the reference to public speech in social discourses, which propound its civic virtue. It first examines some of the principal arguments, which underlie the justification for recourse to speech in the rhetorical setting of what Habermas designated as communicative action. It then examines certain of the axiomatic presuppositions which found such a justification, in particular the existence of a principle of truth, the anthropological discarding of all agonistic violence, and the ethical and political hypostasis of language. It lastly confronts public speech, on one hand, with the sociological criticism of Bourdieu, and, on the other hand, with various expressions of negative dialectics, deconstruction, ideological criticism, and post-modern thought. In conclusion, the essay proposes a paradoxical reflection, inspired by Lévinas and Blanchot, in particular, on the disenchanted value of public speech and the enigmatic nature of philosophical signification – solitary, mute, and agoraphobic.

Ralph Heyndels is Professor of French and Comparative Literature in University of Miami, email: heyndelsralph@hotmail.com.

What does the reference to public speech signify, from the point of view of its functioning in the contemporary social discourses which proclaim its civic virtue? And, furthermore, now from a philosophical approach, what does the designation of this speech – which becomes increasingly present and pressing in these discourses – represent, as an indispensable condition for the epistemic establishment of what is defined, since Habermas (1984), as *communicative action* and whose ethical determinations have constituted the topic of numerous commentaries – particularly, in France, the reflection of J-M. Ferry (1987)?

These are the preoccupations that motivated this present essay of reflection, initially inspired by the marked recurrence, in certain political debates with which we are confronted today, of the nominal autotelic syntagm which constitutes the theme of this conference, and which, in the discursive strategies to which it leads, connotes, by a sort of regulatory implication, that which it is, by this mediation, assumed to denote.

Quite assuredly – and this undoubtedly concerns us in the institutional setting where we are situated here – the mention of public speech somewhat depends upon a type of exercising of itself summoning a rhetoric of specular nature which intends to produce the semantic effect of its founding authenticity.

In this regard, in the perspective outlined here, it is generally understood that public speech plays an essential performative role in that it is considered a process of structuring sociality in a progressive form of moral collective conscience. This, in turn, is endowed both with a goal and a capacity for the harmonisation of specific interests in the multiple dialogical space of an *ideal speech situation* where a *shared* rationality can exert a self-reflexive liberating action in confrontation with its monopolisation by group particularities – of class, caste, gender, generation, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. – and a critical vigilance in regard to the permanent risk of its own administered, nearly arbitrary, indeed totalitarian, reification.

Therefore, rather than attempting to identify in the formula "public speech" a paradigm of exhaustive claims, or to concentrate *substantially* on what is, no doubt, nothing other than itself caught in the register of its designation – it would perhaps be appropriate to ask one's self why this matter of public speech is interrogated with insistence and perseverance in certain localities – among them, this site at which we are *hic et nunc* gathered. Or yet: to reflect upon the status of the very question which is pondered here in endeavouring to at least partially identify its system of implicit axioms.

No doubt at the most essential of such an axiomatic configuration lies the type of thetic assertion that a potentiality of truth necessary for our historical and collective destiny is fulfilled, even if it is in a lapidary, confused, fragmentary or insufficient manner, in and through the expression of public speech which finds itself identified simultaneously with a role of completion and a position of justification whose very goal is, effectively, the definition of democracy.

A certain conception of democracy as a dynamic construction that is at once stable and always threatened by tactics of instrumentalisation is in fact *introjected* in the legitimising reference to public speech. It finds itself thus reciprocally justified, precisely by the constructive and anti-instrumental action that it is supposed to exercise in the democratic process, but also by the doxical truth that it is thought

to reproduce as a conscience revealed to itself. This is why, in the historical and social context where its own *raison d'être* is determined, it is essential, in a positive and active manner, not only to permit public speech, but also to encourage it; not only to promote it, but also to give it the symbolic and material means for its efficiency; not only to welcome it, but much more importantly, to transmit it, to disseminate it, and also, in a reasoning process of inclusion (certain people will say: of recuperation) to grant "everybody" access to it, without discrimination, but additionally, without privilege – this is the meaning, nowadays sacred, of *freedom of expression*.

In this regard, the *leader* of public speech is its *porteur* (bearer), the "porte-parole" (spokesperson) and his position is justified by a mandate which stipulates his hermeneutic capacity to decode the meaning which has been delegated to him and of which he is the authorised *profférateur* (enunciator) precisely in the degree to which he has understood it.

The subject of public enunciation is consequently the product of a discursive ordering and of the conditions of elocution that the linguistic form of its intervention establishes. It is a constitutive authority of that which it strives to signify, and is enmeshed in its contribution to the discovery of a truth whose validity of enunciations which emanates from and returns to it is assured by this very process.

Otherwise stated, unless opposing one's self to the very idea of this truth – in a manner that consequently can only be at the same time "obscurantist" and "reactionary," – it is not possible today, it doesn't even make any conceivable sense, to be explicitly "against" public speech, precisely because it does not exist as such – as a "substance" – but is only ever the stakes of its own pragmatic definition in the frame of reference where it is practised and where the modalities and rituals of its staging, the rules and mechanisms of its distribution, its division, and its delegation, and the criteria of its authority, are articulated.

The hypothesis of a truth that is not only accessible to, but in fact created – or, rather, recreated – by public speech – albeit in a manner constitutively incomplete et therefore in permanent development – most assuredly emerges from what Masquelier and Siran (1999), for example, term an anthropology of interlocution.

It is in this model (which can also be envisioned as fiction, indeed as "magical convention;" I will come back to this notion) that the "(re)discovery" of a previously latent or obscured rationality operates – as what was formerly reserved for philosophical activity – except that it does not result in this instance from a rupture with the *doxa*, but, on the contrary, from its associative *mise en oeuvre* (implementation) in a polyphonic orchestration of *le bon sens* [common sense] as *chose la mieux partagée* (the best shared entity), notably, a recaptured shared consciousness thanks to which man's goals can acquire a concrete universality through a *bon usage* (proper language usage) to which the "maximally possible" faculty is attributed in order to surpass the contingent limitations of the particular, and to reconcile individual satisfactions, needs, and desires with the absolute of ultimate values.

Public speech is thus entrusted with a type of *transcendental practicality*. It is, in fact, the *sine qua non* condition of freedom of expression which precisely holds, in political modernity, the status of an *immanent transcendental* to all of human rights. Such an anthropological construction itself participates in critical thought that could

be characterised as *enlightened,* and from which the diagnostics which consequently aim to *submit to pathological analysis* "post-modern" symptoms of narcissistic solipsism and egocentric hedonism, the anomie of the symbolic economy of imitation, the desemantisation and generalised sophistry, and the argumentative amorphousness of the *talk show* are formulated (see Lipovetsky 1980).

It is normatively articulated on a contractual code of ethics, legal statutes, and power and social relations whose opportunity for truth that it establishes encourages in turn the sociographic pinpointing, the ethical questioning, and the political casting of doubt, to the extent that it is only conceivable if the governed themselves become a factor in the production of power. One can obviously recognise within this discussion some notional elements resulting from the *Philosophy of Enlightenment* by Ernst Cassirer (1951) as well as some considerations on the relations between *Natural Law and History* in Leo Strauss' terms (Strauss 1953).

It is thus by the yardstick of this *principle of truth* inscribed in the very designation of public speech that its heuristic capacity and efficiency – its theory and praxis, if you will – can be symbolically measured as a social and discursive semanteme which is simultaneously speculative and invocatory. Such a principle is precisely without *content* – in the sense that Adorno gives to the notion of "*content of truth*" Heyndels 1985; 1996). It is, in fact, strictly regulatory, in that the transcendence that it brings about depends upon an at least relative adherence not only to the transparence – if not actual, at least potential – of language, but, furthermore, to the presumption of its functional conviviality. The valorisation of public speech – which constitutes its deictic – is thus implied within the very recourse to which it refers, and the anthropology which underlies its affirmation and realisation is organically connected to a rhetoric of the oratorical encounter (of the *meeting*), indeed, to a veritable aesthetic of organised conversation.

In the absence of any superior authority, public speech can thus concurrently become the matrix and the guarantor of the validity, or of the acceptability, of the social, political, and ethical enunciations positioned at the horizon of its principle of truth.

This legitimacy rests on three interdependent postulates, without which it would be unthinkable, and whose identification permits the location of an ideal type of public speech such as it is considered here.

It is firstly a matter of the scotomising of enmity, or of the repression of the *other as obstacle* – which, as Pierre Saint-Amand in *The Laws of Hostility* has recently demonstrated, is genetically constitutive of the anthropological gesture of the Enlightenment – with the apparent exception of de Sade being symmetrically caught, in fact, within the ideal hegemony of the very mental restriction that it claims to challenge (Saint-Amand 1996).

This gesture, which endeavours to some extent to definitively vanquish all of the "hell of relations" to which Hobbes ontologically limits the human condition (see Frémont 1984), proceeds from a fundamental confidence in the alleged "original nature" of man, a concept which the Enlightenment is susceptible to sharing by critically traversing the shadow cast by its historic and indeed lamentable degradation, but due to factors whose identification must permit correction. The future of man, which lies therefore in a *stoppage of history*, is consequently conceivable as the permanent amelioration – the reform – of a present in which it is al-

ready potentially inscribed, even if it is not necessarily attained.

The emergence of modernity as the reign of sociability, dialogue, and exchange placed in a controlled shift with rivalry and competition, is thus accompanied by a veritable exile of agonistic relationships and of violence in the territories of an "archaic unconscious" whose effects of returning are thus considered as impulsive, erratic, and incomprehensible.

To the degree that the use of language becomes affected by a type of pragmatic coefficient, itself based upon an interlocutory rationality, such an anthropological eradication of the *agôn* is accompanied by an ethical and political hypostasis of "*ce que parler veut dire*" (what speaking means) – to associate an expression devoted by François Châtelet (1965) to the moral merit of the Platonic method, and the title of an essay in which Pierre Bourdieu, in contrast, queries what he calls "the naive question of the power of words" consisting "in searching for the power of words in words, that is to say, where it is not" (Bourdieu 1982, 103; see Bourdieu 1991).

The constitution of a civil space resulting from such an *ex-communication* of violence, requires, in fact, that public speech be radically differentiated from the cry and the complaint, from the clamour of resentment and from fanatic acclamation, from the moaning, from the sound and the fury. Here it performs, on the contrary, an action that we could qualify as collectively psychoanalytical – namely, indissolubly enunciative and therapeutic – in which the *saying* of words is endowed a positive power of inflection on the course of the *things* that they say – not only by the resolution of conflicting tensions, but also by the modulation of co-operative orderings and equal balances.

The communicational context that its very advent establishes is constitutively detached from the *deixis* of a limited subject by the dissociative particularity (whether this be the possessive individualism of Hobbes or the class consciousness of Marx).

It is by definition *extensive* and transcends the egocentricity of the speaker by integrating the situation of the addressee in the enunciation, or, rather, an interpretation of this situation according to the conditions of shared intelligibility permitting a situational interaction. Here, the enunciation becomes a consciously conjoined activity which penetrates the agonistic impulses of the "archaic unconscious" by offering a position of co-enunciator to the addressee in what Herman Parret (1983) describes as "the intersubjective elaboration of meaning."

Such public speech thus includes – in variable proportions, and most often in an implicit manner – the *non-distanced* (immediate) recognition produced simultaneously from the interior of itself on the exteriority that it identifies, of *alterity* as *semblable.*

The attribution of an interlocutory function to the protagonists of the stakes in contention is part of the very matter of that which it debates and to which it refers. It thus always emerges from a *we* in which is included the *I of another,* and the meaning to which it refers depends precisely on the state that the speaker grants to this other and on the relationship of *(re)conciliation* that he/she desires to undertake with this other.

In what one could call, following the thought of Francis Jacques (1983), "the placing of enunciation into communality," the agents who formulate this public speech "*jointly* appropriate for themselves the device of language to enunciate their

correlative position of co-locutor and use language to signify a shared relationship to the world" (Jacques 1982). The subjective impulse – the *absolute possessive* of Hobbes – unravels and is replaced by a "relational construction," specifically constituted in and by language, which brings about a (re)positioning of subjects – as partners – , and of singularity – in a complicit alterity of identity that it contributes to elaborate in – here I again quote Francis Jacques – "the transcendental space of interlocution."

In the final analysis, no invocation of public speech as a civic foundation exists which does not assume the precondition of an "originally" non-agonistic human nature, a "consequentially" ethical virtue of truth, and an "interlocutorily" performative capacity of language.

The idealism (or the "magic" conventionalism) of this last element has been the object of a critical approach outlined by Bourdieu in *Language and Symbolic Power*, where, through Austin, it is in fact directed against the Habermasian effort of reversal – one can also see there a "diverting" – of the Adornian negative dialectic:[1] "Trying to linguistically understand the capability of linguistic expressions … (Bourdieu writes) This is the principle of error whose most accomplished expression is provided by Austin (or Habermas following him)" (Bourdieu 1991, 105). This claim of words to act upon the social world, that is to say, *magically* {the author of *Distinction* continues to say}is more or less illogical or *reasonable* – and I would emphasise here this reference to reason (and madness) for the remainder of my exposé – according to the extent that it is more or less based in the objectivity of the social world. Indeed, and it is still the sociologist who is speaking, "The performative enunciation as an institutional act cannot socio-logically exist independently from the institution which grants it its raison d'ętre, and in the case that it would come to be produced in spite of everything, it would be socially deprived of meaning" (Bourdieu 1991, 72).

It is not so much the social and political trial that Bourdieu institutes which catches my attention here – even though it does not lack conviction and could present in itself, in the present context, the theme of a discussion on the stakes of democracy – but, rather, that aspect in which his analysis of linguistic and rhetorical formalism (because if it is Austin who is named, it could also pertain to Perelman)[2] allows the identification, in the case which interests us, the recourse to a phenomenology of public speech – such as that which was just sketched – as ideological procedure, and permits its placement in a philosophical perspective. The disassociation of public speech from its constraints of execution and access to symbolic instruments and means of expression (let us refer simply to all of the problematic of "freedom of speech" in a world saturated by the domination of capitalist macro-media) does not, in fact, only originate from a sociological question (which would, incidentally, interrogate its own premises – what is, for example, "the objectivity of the social world"?) It indexes as much, if not more, the ethical validity of the very rationality in whose name its self-government is executed, and more essentially perhaps, its own ability to signify something other than a principle of truth which would be only identity-based, in other words, reflecting, in the last analysis, the rhetorical machineries of a "*lying truly*" – this refers to a formula taken from Aragon's novel *La Mise ŕ mort* to which I have devoted a study aiming to demonstrate that in this novel it permits the rhetorical narrative strategies of a "*truly lying*" (Heyndels 1989).

In fact, the risked effects of a perverse economy contaminate the establishment of "democratic" public speech as a social space protected from violence by an anthropological fiction and rendered propitious to consensual dialogism in the name of a conventional a priori of the neutrality of language.

Indeed, the communicative act, as it is the foundation of the recourse to public speech, proposes a manner of exiting the metaphysical drama of modern reason to the extent that this reason is paradoxically derived from a radical foundation which is itself groundless (Heyndels 1996) – or, rather, it metamorphoses its tragedy into drama, in order thus to allow an escape-way. But such a solution does not only fall under a syntagmatic analysis of concrete, applied, *practical* reason penetrating the agonistic relations.

It also implies the abstract denial of a violence inscribed in modern reason itself, as generator of total administration according to Adorno (but also in the opinion of Frederic Jameson, and in Marxist neo-historicism), of infinite (and infernal) objectification of the signifieds according to Derrida (but also according to Judith Butler, and in post-feminism), of alienating marginalisation of othernesses according to de Certeau (but also for Clifford Geertz and in so-called "post-colonial studies"), of bi-polar essentialisation of sexuality and of gender codes for Foucault (but also for David Halperin and in *queer studies*).

More particularly, the rationalist eradication of enmity, conditional for interlocutory anthropology, is, without a doubt, I dare to assert, less "friendly" than it seems at first glance, if at least we understand by friendship not the respectable excess of similitude, but a simultaneously enlightened and appeased recognition of a *common alterity* implying, according to Blanchot (1971, 328-329), "that infinite distance, that fundamental separation at which the very division becomes a relationship."

The a priori elimination of *the other as obstacle* carries with it just as much that of *the other as essential other* – namely that which Lévinas calls the infinite of the Face – just as the positive hermeneutic of a spokesperson covers over any chance left to the enigma and to the *despite everything* of the allegedly useless action, and the consensual logic of dialogism provokes the disappearance of the very idea of an unthinkable alternative.

In the thought of Lévinas – whose intervention permits us now to displace, to decentre public speech precisely toward its own "other" – there is no alterity other than a radical one – namely: that which can not be reduced to "utilitarian" rhetorical pacts by agreements oriented toward predetermined goals. All true intersubjectivity located there is based upon an irreducible dissymmetry excluding practical intentions, subjectivity itself being, moreover, divided from within, structurally inadequate – not by a default of suitability, but by the effect of an infinite excess of significance in its negative relationship with any fixed register of interiority.[3]

The consensus of interlocution, according to Francis Jacques, or the adoption of the audience, according to Perelman, is opposed by the friendship of incompatibles, the absolute vertigo of divergences, an unconditional enthusiasm with regard to the energy of the negative.

Contrary to that which occurs in the phenomenology of public speech, communication demands its very default. Not being itself a finality to reach, it is determined by "*la cod'ncidence des déchirures*" [the coincidence of openings] – I hereby, in

fact, modify an expression of Bataille taken from *La valeur d'usage de Sade* – not the convergence of completeness.

The public aspect of speech – from, to, and in public – is undoubtedly indispensable to the well-being of all collective neuroses which unite us in the shadow of the demise of the major narratives. But the speech of which *saying*? In his reading of Martin Buber's "philosophy of dialogue", Lévinas (1987, 49) wonders about language as "*Saying*": "Is it absorbed in the *Said* without distinguishing itself from it?"[4]

The public nature of speech, then, is no doubt indispensable. But of what existential meaning does it resonate if aporia, far from being its finality, is only the technical manipulation (the rhetoric) of a "*lying truly*"? Fully engaged in the applicatory and inertial of the identity principle in which things are what they are, public speech is disenchanted by design. But it is, definitively, all that we have, all that is left in the surroundings of a deconsecrated metaphysic. It invokes such a deceptive situation; it lays claims to its position within it. It intends to inscribe itself at the specific moment where only life – because it is "mutilated", as Adorno could have said – , in its unworthy prose and in its assured renunciation, permits the vanity of former grand certainties, lost illusions, but also the ultimate impertinence of all vanity, to be experimented. But also, on the edge of all its limitations, or on the reverse side of its limited effectiveness, expulsed, solitary, mute, agoraphobic, and perceptible only in the trace of its ejection, the very meaning of things which are what they are, and of which we remain unaware, perseveres.

Translated by Paulette Hacker.[5]

Notes:

1. See, among others, J.–M. Vincent; *La Théorie critique de l'école de Francfort* (Paris: Galilée, 1976).

2. "It is clear that all efforts to find the principle of symbolic efficacy for different forms of argumentation, rhetoric, and stylistics within a specifically linguistic logic are destined for failure" (Bourdieu 1991, 109-111).

3. On this problematic, see E. Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press); *Entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

4. On this problematic, see: R. Heyndels, "L'arrẹt de mort de la vision moderne (Descartes, Lévinas, Derrida)," in M.-F. Picard (ed.), *Mises en scène du regard* (Halifax: Dalhousie French Studies, 1995) and R. Heyndels, "La pointe du pire: Lévinas et la mémoire" in *Francographies* (New York: Fordham University Press/SPFA, 1993).

5. Translator's note: All French quotations have been translated by myself and verified by the author. Paginal references are to the original French text.

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