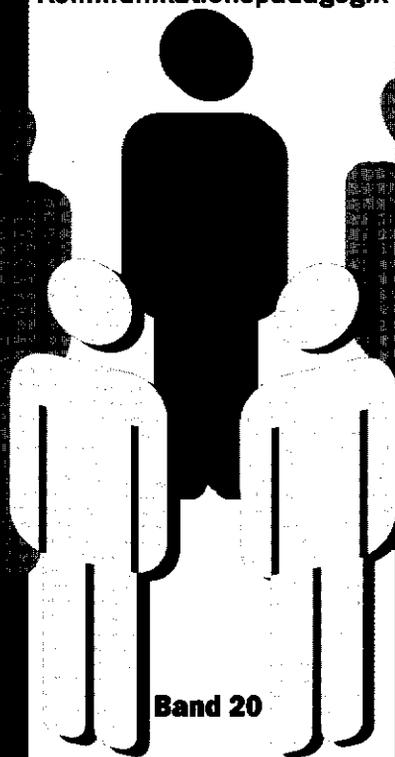


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Communication and Political Change

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Communication, Freedom and Democracy in the Eighteenth Century

The connection between communication, culture, values and forms of governments a topic that, in spite of its modernity, has been of interest in a variety of disciplines for centuries. Humans have been curious about why other humans communicate differently than they do. And indeed, why they are unable to understand each other. Plato, of course, condemned democracy because of its use of rhetoric, and rhetoric because of its use in democracies. Plato had little use for written communication, instead he preferred the give and take of oral argument and dialectic. In the hierarchical state that he envisioned, Plato foresaw a society in which the search for truth was paramount. Plato, as he is often quoted, said “even right opinion falls far short of truth.” Persuasive communication had, in his view, the function of deciding important questions by influencing opinion. He was suspicious of a form of communication that made the “worse seem the better cause through the force of eloquence.”

In the Rhetoric Aristotle was directly concerned with the relationship between forms of government and the nature of the communication which occurred in them. He explicitly differentiated between the rhetoric of monarchies, oligarchies and democracies. He concluded that the rhetoric of the Athenian democracy was far more closely connected to freedom than in states ruled by an individual or by a self-selected group.

A historical period in which this connection attracted a good deal of attention was the period known now as the Enlightenment, which reached its full development in the eighteenth century. Science, as we now know it, originated during the Enlightenment. Empirical observation and experimentation became the standards of scientific knowledge. Perhaps no period in history has been more decisive in its influence on our lives. Much of what we call modern may be traced to that radical change in human thought. In a sense, all Europeans and Americans are children of the Enlightenment. Our values, our beliefs, our cosmology, our modes of thought and our perspectives of the world date to that era. Many of our ideas of government and representation, the place of the human beings in society, our attitudes toward science and our religious beliefs are products of the Enlightenment. All traditional ideas, political, religious, and social were now open to examination.

The Enlightenment philosophers and other writers, now that their fields of inquiry had been significantly widened, investigated many aspects of human thought and behavior. This period was marked by a search for laws and predictions in human nature similar to those discovered by Newton and other scientists. One of the areas of great interest was that of language and communication.

The modern British philosopher Isaiah Berlin clearly explained why it was necessary to devote attention to the study of language and communication:

The eighteenth century is perhaps the last period in the history of Western Europe when human omniscience was thought to be an attainable goal. The unparalleled progress of physics and mathematics transformed the generally held view of the nature of the world, and still more, of the nature of true knowledge, to such a degree that that this epoch still stands like a barrier between us and the ages which preceded it...Yet the ancient disciplines of metaphysics, logic, ethics and all that related to the social life of men still lay in chaos, governed by the confusions of thought and language of an

earlier and unregenerate age. It was natural and almost inevitable, that those who have been liberated by the new science should seek to apply their principles and methods to a subject which was clearly in even more desperate need than the facts of the external world (Berlin 1961, 14f.).

The Enlightenment was a time of curiosity about the history and development of humanity. Theological explanations were being questioned, doubted, or even rejected. Thus, inquiry became concerned with the speculative and observable aspects of human history. As history was pursued, the questions of how and when language and communication skills were acquired and developed was of considerable interest to Enlightenment thinkers. Writers ranging from Giambattista Vico to John Locke to Adam Smith thought it was important to address the question as part of their inquiries concerning the human condition. Particularly, they were concerned with the relation of language and thought. To understand human beings as communicating beings, they felt was an essential part of understanding them as intelligent persons.

The interest in humans and their faculties, combined with concern about freedom and the challenge to religious and civic authority, brought about a renewed and remarkably revised interest in the ancient subject of rhetoric. Works about rhetoric were reflective of the new philosophical thought.

The history of the ancient world was of significant interest to eighteenth century writers. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was the most prominent work of this sort in English and Rollin's *History of the Ancient World* in French. Rhetoric and oratory were so characteristic of Greek and Roman society that the Eighteenth Century writers recognized that it was mandatory that they investigate the place of communication in those societies. Much interest was shown in how cultures influenced which forms of communication were permitted and what restrictions were placed on communication. The social institutions of ancient Greece and Rome

were of particular interest. Not surprisingly, the explanations offered were often a product of the values of the cultures in which the authors wrote. The writers were concerned with “national character.” At the same time, they were much influenced by their own “national character.” We would expect that governmental restraints, or the absence of them, would indicate how the connection between communication and freedom would be seen.

The most significant reawakening of interest in rhetoric occurred in Britain, particularly in Scotland. The new interest was present, although to a lesser extent on the continent. Some investigation, in particular, took place in France. The examinations of the history of rhetoric in these countries were reflective of the societies in which the writers lived. Writers in the two countries differed in their conceptions of the role of communication as an agent, an accompaniment, and a prerequisite of independence and freedom.

The writers in Britain and France perceived the connection differently, and they also interpreted the history of rhetoric in ways that were dissonant from each other. Different positions on individual and political freedom were held as well the purpose and social utility of public communication.

Typical of this kind of investigation was the writings of Dr. Hugh Blair in Scotland and Charles Rollin in France. Blair was the longtime Regius Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Edinburgh. He was the author of *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1860). Rollin, whose works on rhetoric are largely contained in *The History of the Ancient World* (1828), was Professor of Eloquence at the *Collège Royale* in Paris. Although they were near contemporaries, it is important to recognize that Rollin wrote during the reign of the Bourbons, and Blair produced his work shortly after the union of Scotland and England at a time of emerging democracy. These environmental differences influenced their political and communicative

perspectives. The different orientations of an absolute and a constitutional monarchy are evident in their writings.

Rollin found the source of effective communication in the stability of the state: “Eloquence does not usually grow up amidst the cares that are necessary in founding a state and the tumult of wars. She is the friend of peace and the companion of tranquility, and requires, if I may venture the expression, for her cradle a commonwealth already established and flourishing.” (Rollin 1828, 355f.)

Blair’s view of the communicative environment was almost the direct opposite of Rollin’s. He made a clear connection between communication and freedom in his lecture on “The History of Eloquence.”

It is an observation made by several writers that eloquence is to be looked for only in free states. Longinus in particular, [...] illustrates this observation with a great deal of beauty. Liberty, he remarks, is the nurse of true genius, it animates the spirit and invigorates the hopes of men; excites honorable emulation [...] and a desire of excelling in every art. All other qualifications you may find among those who are deprived of liberty; but never did a slave become an orator; he can only be a pompous flatterer (Blair 1860, 264).

Blair even offered a critical appraisal of French communicative practice, and of “arbitrary” government in particular. He contrasted the activity of democracies with the limitations of absolute governments.

Their [French] eloquence, however, in general must be confessed to be of a flowery rather than the vigorous kind; more to please and soothe rather than to convince and persuade. High, manly and forcible eloquence is, indeed to be looked for only, or chiefly, in the regions of freedom. Under arbitrary governments [...] the art of speaking cannot be such an instrument of ambition, business and power as it is in a democratical state. It is confined within a narrower range; it can be employed only in the pulpit or at the bar; but is excluded from the great scenes of public business; where the spirits of men have their greatest exertion; where important affairs are transacted, and persuasion is, of course, more seriously studied. Wherever man can acquire most power over men by reason and discourse, which is certainly under a free state of government, there may we expect that true eloquence will be best understood and carried to the greatest height. (Blair 1860, 265)

In contrast to Blair, Rollin emphasized the personal aggrandizement that could result from skill in communication. The rhetoric described by Rollin had no connection to civic responsibility. In it there was no concern with the ethics of persuasion, no attention to the social purposes of communication, and no sense of responsibility to listeners. Rollin's chief concern seemed to be the personal power that might be gained through the mastery of rhetoric. Above all, he gave no attention to rhetoric as an agent of public will. He believed that:

[...] This is a talent which exalts the orator above the [...] vulgar of mankind, almost above humanity itself; [...] which gives him an empire over the mind [...] which enables him to sway the heart to its purposes, to overcome the most obstinate resistance, to inspire such sentiments as he pleases, joy or sorrow, love or hatred, hope or fear, compassion or resentment, [...] where the orator by his eloquence over an immense people, who hear with profound silence interrupted only by applause and acclamations [...] is there anything so grand so self soothing as this? (Rollin 1828, 363)

Rollin did write about persuasion, but his notion of persuasion was based on emotional and ethical proof, with little or no attention to logical proof. In contrast, Blair eschewed the motive of personal advancement, and stressed the importance of substance and purpose.

To be truly eloquent is to speak to the purpose. For the best definition which I think can be given of eloquence, is the art of speaking in such a manner as to attain the end for which we speak. Whenever a man speaks or writes, he is supposed, as a rational being to have some end in view; either to inform, to amuse, or to persuade. He who speaks in such a manner is the most eloquent man.

It follows clearly, that in order to persuade, the most essential requirements are solid argument, clear method, a character of probity appearing in the speaker, joined with such graces of style and utterances as shall draw attention to what he says. Good sense is the foundation of all. No man can be truly eloquent without it, for fools can persuade none but fools. In order to persuade a man of sense you must first convince him; by satisfying his

understanding of the reasonableness of what you propose to him. (Blair 1860, 261f.)

It is apparent that Blair defined eloquence, or communicative competence, with emphasis on logical and ethical proof, with hardly any attention to emotional proof.

Rollin and Blair both discussed the history and origins of rhetoric in ancient Greece and Rome. Readings of their works reveal how their orientations and environments affected their interpretations of history. As might be expected, Rollin saw Athenian eloquence as a product of peace and tranquility. He asserted that a cyclic growth and a cyclic decay had occurred at Athens:

Greece, so fertile in genius for all the other arts, was long time barren in respect to eloquence, and, before Pericles, may in some measure be said to have spoken like an infant, and that till then had she had only a small idea and set little value upon the talent of speaking. It was at Athens that eloquence first began to appear with splendour and it is not surprising that it was not in honour there, till after many ages. Eloquence does not grow up amidst the cares that are necessary in founding a state and the tumult of wars. (Rollin 1828, 367f.)

Blair, in contrast, found the source of Greek eloquence in the establishment of democratic government and the growth of popular political participation.

Greece was divided into a multitude of petty states [...] there sprung up a number of democratical governments [...] of these Grecian republics, the most noted for eloquence, and indeed for arts of every kind was that of Athens [...] The genius of their government was altogether democratical...in the general convention of citizens was placed the last resort; and affairs there were conducted by reasoning, speaking and skillful application to the passions and interests of a popular assembly. There laws were made, peace and war was decreed, and then the magistrates were chosen [...] nor was the meanest tradesman excluded from a seat in their supreme courts. In such a state eloquence, it is obvious would be much studied [...] and what sort of eloquence? Not that which was brilliant, merely and showy; but that which was found, upon trial, to be the most effectual for interesting, convincing and persuading the hearers. For there

public speaking was not a mere competition for empty applause, but a serious contention for that public leading which was a great object both of men of ambition and men of virtue. (Blair 1860, 273)

When Rollin wrote about the communicative environment in Athens and Rome his emphasis was on the personal gains to be achieved through eloquence, rather than its functional use in society. “Whoever spoke in those assemblies with the most eloquence, became by necessary consequences the most powerful. Hence the youth of any ambition did not fail to apply themselves, with the utmost diligence, to a study that alone opened the way to riches, credits and dignities. (Rollin 1828, 364)

To be fair to Rollin, however, it should be acknowledged that he did recognize that, in Athens and Rome, democratic societies provided a nurturing environment for the cultivation of eloquence.

As well as at Athens and Rome, the two great theatres in which the mind shown out with the most luster, no study was ever cultivated more universally, nor with greater application and ardour, than that of eloquence. And we ought not to wonder at it. In republics like these, where all the affairs of state were examined in common; where war and peace, alliances and laws, were deliberated either before the people or the senate, or with both; and where everything was determined by plurality of voices, the talent of speaking must have prevailed. (Rollin 1828, 364)

Blair and Rollin offered quite different explanations for the disappearance of eloquence at Athens. Eloquence, wrote Blair, declined with the loss of liberty. He stated the cause simply and concisely: “After the days of Demosthenes, Greece lost her liberty; eloquence, of course languished, and relapsed again into the feeble manner introduced by the rhetoricians and sophists” (Blair 1860, 273).

Rollin, in part, agreed with Blair by mentioning “the ruin of liberty at Athens.” He, however, explained the decline as an almost inevitable organic decay, largely due to the decline of the standards of rhetorical taste.

This bad taste made its way with into the provinces where it became still more corrupt. As soon as eloquence had quitted the Piraeus [...] it lost that Attic health and vigour it had preserved for so long at home, assumed the manners of strangers and almost unlearned to speak. The ruin of liberty at Athens partly conduced to hasten that of eloquence. The great men who had done it so much by the talent of their speaking, appeared no more (Rollin 1828, 371f.).

Rollin's explanations for the rise and decline of eloquence in Rome were much like those that he stipulated for Greece. He posited tranquility and the influence of the Greeks as the primary causes of the development of eloquence at Rome. The decline he explained as a natural development.

It was not till after she had subjected the most powerful nations and established herself in peace and tranquility that her commerce with Greece began to reform her grossness [...] The Roman youth who seemed to wake out of a profound sleep, became sensible to a new species of glory unknown to their ancestors and began to open their eyes and conceive a taste for eloquence.

As soon as the Grecian rhetoricians had been heard at Rome, and taught there, and their books began to be read, the Roman youth conceived an incredible ardour for eloquence (372).

Rollin's explanation of the death of eloquence was quite simplistic. "It is the usual lot of human beings, when they have attained their highest perfection, to decline soon, and to degenerate ever after, Eloquence experienced this sad fatality at Rome" (378).

Blair remained an adherent of political explanations for the decline and fall of Roman eloquence. He traced its death to the loss of freedom in Rome: "The reign of eloquence among the Romans was very short. After the age of Cicero it languished or rather expired; and we have no reason to wonder at this being the case. For not only was liberty entirely extinguished but arbitrary power felt its heaviest and most oppressive weight." (Blair 1860, 268) Rollin in his explanation made no mention of the Roman political system.

Rollin did not compare Greek rhetoric with that of Rome. Blair did and found, on balance that, since the Romans were dependent on the Greeks, their work was inferior to that of the Greeks.

As the Romans derived their eloquence, poetry and learning from the Greeks, so they must be confessed to be far inferior to them in genius for all these accomplishments [...] we shall always find that this distinction obtain, that in the Greek productions there is more native genius; in the Roman more regularity and art. What the Greeks invented the Romans polished; the one was original, rough sometimes, and incorrect; the other a finished copy. (Rollin 1828, 273f.)

Adam Smith, in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, also compared Greek and Roman rhetoric. Smith, however, emphasized the more direct democracy of Greece.

The nobleman of Rome would, then, find himself greatly superior to the greater part of mankind [...] his discourse would be pompous and ornate, such as appeared to be the language of a superior man.

At Athens, on the other hand, the citizens were all on equal footing: the greatest and meanest were considered in no way distinguished, and; lived and talked together with the greatest familiarity (Smith n. d., 162).

David Hume, as well as Blair, was interested in comparing the public communication of Britain with that of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Both of them believed that ancient eloquence, especially that of the Greeks, was superior to that of the eighteenth century. Blair thought that although freedom prevailed in Britain, the complexity of British life made contemporary British public communication inferior to that of Greece and Rome.

Though the parliament of Great Britain be the noblest field, which Europe at this day affords to a public speaker, yet eloquence has never been so powerful an instrument there, as it was in the popular assemblies of Greece and Rome. Under some former reigns, the high hand of arbitrary power bore a violent sway; and in later times ministerial influence has generally prevailed [...] Among them [the Greeks and Romans] the laws were few and simple [...] Here was an ample field for what they termed judicial

eloquence. But among the moderns, the case is quite altered. The system of law has become much more complicated. The art of speaking is but a secondary accomplishment [...] knowledge much more than oratory has become the principal requisite. (Blair 1860, 283).

Hume, in his *Essay on Eloquence*, agreed that the complexity of the laws placed restrictions on contemporary eloquence. He, however, also offered a somewhat more cynical and sophisticated explanation for the differences.

Interestingly, Hume attributed some of the superiority of Greek and Roman rhetoric to the chaotic and cruel conditions of their government:

“I [...] Where a pleader addresses himself to the equity of his judges, he has much more room to display his eloquence, than where he must draw from strict law, statutes and precedents.

II [...] The decline of eloquence is owing to the superior good sense of the moderns, who reject with disdain all those rhetorical tricks, employed to seduce the judges, and will admit of nothing but solid arguments in any debate or deliberation.

III [...] The disorders of ancient governments, and the enormous crimes, of which the citizens were often guilty, afforded much ampler matter than can be found among the moderns” (Hume n. d., 59).

Finally, Hume asserted that the ancients were superior because their standards of taste were higher than those of the moderns. “Ancient eloquence [...] is of a much juster taste than the modern [...] and if properly executed, will always have more command and authority over mankind. We are satisfied with our mediocrity because we have no experience of anything better.” (60)

Since Hume was disdainful of Eighteenth Century public communication in his comparison, we are curious as to how he would judge the communication of the twentieth and twenty first Centuries, since the faults he found in his time are exacerbated in our time.

Blair was also critical of the communicative practices of his own time. He was severe in his disapproval of those who spoke only for the sake of

speaking, especially young men who had joined together to improve their public speaking.

As for those public and promiscuous societies in which multitudes are brought together [...] who are joined by no common bond of union, except an absurd rage for public speaking, and have no other object in view but to make a show of their supposed talents, they are an institution not merely of an useless, but of an hurtful nature [...] They mislead those, who in their own calling might be useful members of society (Blair 1860, 384).

The treatment of the history of rhetoric by Blair and other Scottish writers clearly linked purposeful discourse to the freedom of men and institutions. Free, open and meaningful communication, they said can flourish only in free societies. In those states that were not free, such as France, the ostentatious, self-gratifying kind of communication described by Rollin was characterized by the absence of purposeful, political or social discourse.

There may be a lesson for our own time in this discussion. One can speculate, and some historians have, that the freer communication climate in Britain played a significant role in Britain's peaceful political and social change. In bourbon France, on the other hand, the absence, indeed the suppression of political discourse was a factor in creating an environment for violent and terroristic political change during the French Revolution. As we now know, violent revolution is characteristic of societies in which free communication is absent or severely limited.

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