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Building Consensus. An introduction to a rhetorical approach

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This issue collects a part of the papers presented at the conference titled "Building Consensus. Rhetoric between Democracy and Conflict" held in Palermo in April 2015. The aim was to encourage an interdisciplinary investigation of the role of rhetoric and discursive processes in the realization of democracy and its eventual degenerations.

The contemporary debate on this topic seems to be polarized between two different conceptions of democracy: the "deliberative" one and the "agonistic" one. The first one is related to the classical tradition that considers Habermas as its reference point. It emphasizes the role of rational deliberation as a means to produce a legitimate and binding consensus. In contrast, the second one draws its inspiration from C. Schmitt, and considers conflict and disagreement as unavoidable conditions of democratic life. Despite their obvious differences, these two theoretical models have a conception of rhetoric in common that is subjected to, or at least excluded from, the full exercise of argumentative rationality. Nevertheless, an interpretation of rhetoric that includes the logical-argumentative dimension in the rhetorical domain is possible. In this way, the recovery of rhetoric, considered both as a practice and as a theory of persuasive speech, may shed light on the role of discursive processes in building consensus, and thus may allow a revision of the dialectical tension between the pairs of concepts that the debate tends to focus on: normative/descriptive, rational/irrational, agreement/conflict.

To better understand the role that rhetoric can play in this debate, it is useful to explain our idea of rhetoric. Indeed, despite several attempts to revaluate this discipline, the word "rhetoric" has had a negative connotation to date. Indeed in many modern languages, when using the word "rhetoric" the speaker feels almost obliged to add the attribute "good", implying in this way that the term "rhetoric" alone refers to a fundamentally negative phenomenon. The general attitude towards rhetoric tends to associate it to a complex of discursive strategies oriented towards manipulating the interlocutor.

Our idea of rhetoric is completely different from this negative framework. It is rooted in the Aristotelian perspective and therefore by the term rhetoric we mean the theoretical reflection about the persuasive discourse. In the case of this conference there was a specific interest in applying this theoretical reflection to the sphere of the public discourse.

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In particular, our focus was the agonistic dimension of the public debate. Indeed, one of the most relevant aspects in this debate is precisely the role of conflict. The underlying question is: in order to realize a very democracy, is conflict something to avoid by all means or is it something indispensable for democracy itself? Regarding this dilemma, the rhetorical approach seems to be the most useful to consider conflict as an internal and constitutive element of democracy. In this perspective, it is just the dialectic consensus/conflict that feeds public debate.

This rhetorical approach appears to be particularly fruitful, inasmuch as it allows an attempt to overcome the conceptual polarizations mentioned before or, at least, to approach them in a smoother way.

Indeed, in the Aristotelian perspective, there is no choice to make between rhetoric with a "logical-argumentative core", and rhetoric with an "emotional-pathemic core". This dichotomy is actually artificial. The very famous triad of Aristotelian rhetorical proofs (*pisteis*) – *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* – is a clear evidence that Aristotle does not need to put back together the emotional and the logical component, because they coexist from the very beginning. Indeed, *ethos* is the proof based on the character of the speaker, *pathos* is the one based on the emotion of the audience and *logos* is the proof based on the speech itself. Although each of these proofs includes to a certain degree both the intellectual and the desiderative components, *ethos* and *pathos* mainly involve the latter, while *logos* mainly refers to the former. In any case, according to Aristotle, the speaker, in order to persuade his audience, must take into account all these proofs together. In fact, this is the only way to enable the audience to make a choice. This is one of the reasons why the rhetorical approach we propose, considered both as a practice and as a theory of persuasive speech, may shed light on the role of discursive processes in building consensus.

Another dichotomy this approach can help us to problematize is the one – typical of the contemporary debate – between a normative approach and a descriptive one.

The first one focuses on what we *should do* when we argue, while the second one analyses what we *actually do* when we argue. The followers of the normative approach tend to identify "rational" rules able to guarantee the agreement that, in their perspective, largely means consensus; instead, the followers of the descriptive approach are accused of including in their theories the emotional aspects of the argumentative processes, considered by the normativists as irrational and fallacious arguments.

Also in this case the Aristotelian approach seems to be fruitful. Aristotle is in a certain way a normativist, but we would say in a more sophisticated manner: the rules he proposes to follow are flexible because they take into account the real and concrete persuasive practices and, besides, in the Aristotelian perspective, as we have seen before, the emotional appeal is not by itself fallacious or negative.

Given this background, when deciding to organize this conference, one of our main aim was to stimulate a discussion on this topic from different points of view. By "different points of view" we mean both different disciplines and different methodological approaches within the same field.

A simple look at the index of this volume is enough to see that our expectations were completely met. Indeed, the papers collected here approach the topic of consensus following different perspectives and also analysing several and multiple aspects. Some papers focus on the ancient roots of this debate, in particular in the Greek world; some focus on the role played by disagreement and conflict and their relation with democracy; others are concentrated on the link between linguistic aspects and social roles; some others analyse specific case-studies. Not only the issues, but also

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the disciplinary approaches are diverse: rhetoric, philosophy of language, cognitive science, argumentation theory, sociolinguistics, philosophy of science, discourse analysis, economics. This variety in itself is a clear sign of the vivacity of this debate, and the comparison among different disciplines and approaches is stimulating and fruitful. For all these reasons, we think that this issue of RIFL can represent a starting point for further research on this complex and intriguing topic.