

## Book Review

### *Apologie de la polémique*

**Ruth Amossy**

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*Apologie de la polémique* aims to rehabilitate the polemic as a form of public discourse. Ruth Amossy claims that the polemic is both misrepresented and misunderstood because of a bias in rhetorical theory and political theory towards consensus formation. This bias, which is even more evident in theories of argumentation and informal logic, treats disagreement or controversy (dissensus) as a problem to be overcome. Rhetoric and argumentation are then approached as means to establish shared understandings and a well ordered community. Against this view, Amossy asserts the importance of dissensus to public life and offers polemic as a means to foster it.

Amossy offers a sketch of the case against polemic, which begins with Antiquity (and notably Aristotle) casting rhetoric as the agonistic and ethical art of persuasion, in which advocates develop effective proofs, *pisteis*, to support a given set of propositions and overcome contrary arguments. Amossy singles out Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *Nouvelle rhétorique*, a particularly influential touchstone for Amossy's French-language readers, as emblematic of the contemporary tendency to favour reason and arguments resting on broadly, even if not universally held, first principles. Against this approach to argument, she counterpoises eristic, the art of winning arguments without regard for the truth. Eristic as described by Amossy resembles sophistic rhetoric, but without the ethical gestures and alibis offered by sophists such as Gorgias and Protagoras. Not surprisingly, eristic is viewed with suspicion by the

philosophically inclined. Amossy points to Douglas Walton's characterization of eristic as querulous and emotional, favouring fallacy and manipulation, and to the similar views by pragma-dialecticians, such as van Eemeren, and political philosophers such as Habermas who favour a deliberative public sphere based in dialogic reason.

Amossy's defence of polemic begins with a review of critiques of the ideal of consensus. She cites Robert Fogelin's 1985 article in this journal that argues that certain controversies, such as the American one on abortion, are not resolvable because of conflicting first principles. In other words, consensus is at times unattainable. To this she brings Mark Angenot's observation that irreconcilable disagreement is the norm rather than the exception. Moving from the philosophical to the political, Amossy turns to Lewis Coser and Chantal Mouffe, as well rhetorical theorist Kendall Phillips, who argue that dissensus is a good that forms the basis of democratic public life. Finally, she argues that dissensus is produced and maintained through polemic. Polemic is the discursive mode that gives voice to antagonism, filling out and amplifying opposing views, and in doing so strengthens the public sphere.

Amossy's project is theoretical: she aims to understand the nature and functions of polemic. She challenges the received view of polemic and argues for polemic's importance. Significantly, her method is not exclusively analytical or philosophical, but relies extensively on the examination of public discourse, or what rhetoricians refer to as public address. She examines a number of polarizing controversies in France and Israel. Her first objective is to define polemic by identifying its principal characteristics. She begins by focussing on two controversial cases: The first concerns the propriety of a prize-winning photograph that displays a man wiping his *derrière* with the French flag. The second concerns actor Gérard Dépardieu's efforts to renounce his French citizenship to evade France's income tax on the wealthy. Against the view held by many discourse scholars, advocates, and popular critics that polemic is defined by its irrationality and display of intense emotion, the polemics that she observes are fundamentally argumentative. In her account, polemic is a reason-based form of discourse that arises in highly controversial cases that defy consensual resolution. The first of the above two cases opposes freedom of expression to patriotic respect; the second opposes individual interest to civic or republican duty. From these cases, Amossy offers a descriptive definition of polemic as a mode of argument in public conflicts marked by dichotomization, polarization, and the "disqualification," by which she means the discrediting or attacking the ethos

of opponents. As such, polemical discourse is highly partisan, unwilling to concede points. It does not seek to find common ground, but to disqualify opposition and in doing radicalize conflict. As such, despite Amossy's aligning of polemic with eristic, the former is less rhetorical than the latter. Eristic aims to persuade without regard for the truth. In contrast, while a form of public address, polemic is only partially rhetorical because it does always seek to persuade. Specifically, it does not seek to convert opponents. Of course, polemic remains in part rhetorical: It seeks what in rhetoric are referred to as "proofs," justifications derived from a community's stock of shared values to support its claims and denigrate the claims and character of opponents. It seeks to strengthen the resolve of the like-minded as well as gain adherents among those on the sidelines, the third parties, citizens acting as judges in public debate. As such, polemic is a common mode of public address, particularly in the electoral politics and social movements.

In Amossy's account, while polemic does not contribute to consensus, it is a mode that manages conflict through its intensification and purification. Points of disagreement are clarified and lines are drawn, which accounts also for its tendency to include appeals based in ethos, pathos, and identity. This is not an aberration nor should it be surprising, for the issues addressed by polemic run deep and are deeply felt.

After having offered a basic description of polemic, Amossy turns to the question of its functions and modalities. Since polemic does not promote consensus or the resolution of conflict, she seeks to identify what functions and effects it has. Again, she turns to actual cases, particularly as they unfold in media. She argues for the importance of careful textual analysis in order to grasp what the functions of polemic are, focussing on both the French debate over legislation to ban the burqa from public places and the controversial demand by Jewish ultraorthodox sects in Israel that the sexes be segregated in certain public spaces, such as on buses in ultraorthodox neighborhoods. Amossy contrasts her approach to that of "critical discourse analysis" as developed in England, in which the study of discourse is a springboard for political criticism. Amossy favours a neutral analysis, in order better to elucidate the nature and functions of polemic as a form, all the while admitting that journalistic discourse as well as other discourses that she is studying, are not themselves "neutral." They are informed by both the very polemics that they reporting and by dominant (although not necessarily consistent) cultural values. She concludes that polemical discourse, as relayed or conveyed by media, constitutes a public but not a deliberative sphere. This public sphere is

marked by fierce oppositions and a high degree of communicative interaction. Polemical battles open up a “polylog” space with a variety of voices that are not engaged in the common project of finding a middle ground. Each competes for adherents, cites and rebuts opposing discourse, and issues calls to action, while dismissing opponents. Journalists, commentators, and advocates with media access support and configure this dissensual public sphere: they set the stage, place voices in opposition, critically assess some claims, and also make their own. Polemical exchanges, which consist of opposing voices responding to each other directly, further strengthen this sphere, because despite radical differences, competing advocates usually claim to be consistent with broadly accepted norms. Thus for example, those seeking and those denouncing attempts to ban the burqa will passionately invoke and defend French republican values, even though they are not really speaking to each other. What they are doing, however, is sustaining and sharing a public space. In some cases, however, even that space is at risk. Thus, in her review of the debate over sexual segregation in certain places, Amossy remarks that ultraorthodox communities often hold themselves apart from the mainstream. They have their own press, their own local spaces, and are consequently turned inward. Polemic can support such isolationism, but at the same time opens a new space marked by a different division between radicals and moderates, between those who nevertheless insist on a common community, which is not to say a community of consensus, and those promoting increased apartness.

In like manner, Amossy concludes by considering the role of pathos in polemic. She examines debates regarding those who seemed to benefit from corporate bail-out packages during the 2009 recession. She elaborates on her recurring claims that (1) while common, pathos is not necessary to polemic, and (2) that pathos does not undermine polemic’s rational character. While indignation was a recurring emotion in anti-compensation polemical discourse, it did not render it irrational. On the contrary, indignation served as a motive to rationally argue against the injustice of rewarding financiers for their mismanagement and rational arguments were proffered to justify indignation. Furthermore, even when expressions of indignation were not explicitly justified, they drew from common understandings and so functioned enthymematically and thus were also rational. Finally, Amossy discusses the role of emotion in “flaming,” which is to say the practice of making highly charged on-line comments, often featuring personal attacks, in response to news reports and essays on public affairs web sites. These are often virulent and unforgiving, and can even be abusive if not violent, but even so

usually do not dispense with argument. Furthermore, despite resembling interpersonal communication in their informality and rudeness, their ad hominem are normally not really toward others in themselves, but toward their role or communicative persona as arising from what they have advocated. In other words, flaming functions socially and politically, giving rise to passionate on-line communities of protest and political affinity. This does not mean, however, that emotional expression is unbound, for all expression entails risking one's ethos. In all cases, the power of polemic rests upon its capacity to sustain dissensus and hence noisy and raucous spaces of public communication.

Ruth Amossy's *Apologie de la polémique* is a singularly provocative challenge to approaches to rhetoric and argumentation that focus on their production of knowledge through some kind of movement from premises to conclusion, whether by induction, deduction, or what Umberto Eco refers to as abduction. It also challenges theories of rhetoric and argument committed to concepts such as good reasons, prudence, or invitation, which seek to ethically and epistemologically redeem rhetoric by locating virtue and good judgment within both advocates and audiences. Amossy's challenge is particularly salient because what she calls polemic often dominates public life. Despite calls for more listening, for more understanding, and for better narratives, the public sphere remains rife with deep antagonism. While this book is hardly comforting in this regard, it does suggest that such division is normal and indeed healthy as long as we keep talking.