“Antiessentialism, Parrhesia, and Citizenship”

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Abstract

The rise of antiessentialism can have specific consequences regarding economies of power and identity (Anderson, 1992). Specifically, one discovers that as certain antiessentialist practices and discourses emerge determinations about what constitutes a body politic and its membership can also change, reflecting the political, social, or economic goals of the moment. A mechanism to cope with these realities, parrhesia (Foucault, 1985), is understood as a notion of truth or free speech unbounded by rhetoric. It requires a “truth teller” to assume risk (often by opposing some majority), and have some ties to some undeniable logical form (e.g. “truth”). Resistance through the act of parrhesia then can become a tool for the process of “othering” as well as a mechanism to check political power. Though problematic in certain instances, this discursive act can offer a path to citizenship and governance in contemporary society.

Introduction

Over the past several years, a strong undercurrent against rationality, objectivity, and positivism has emerged in discussions of philosophy and administrative thought. In the abstract, each notion of modernity, postmodernity, relativism, and objectivism can bring certain arguments to bear that are both insightful and successful in certain situations and contexts. As is common with much thought on the subjects of governance and administration, each of these ideas/movements has certain conceptual elements of it that can hinder or limit its use (Ramos, 1986). Furthermore, as none of these ideas/movements truly “die off” (Jameson, 2005) we then find that certain ideas become problematic.

Specifically, with the confluence of these ideas/movements there are specific consequences for governance, citizenship, and the administrative state. One such consequence is a function of the emergence of antiessentialism in postmodern thought. As the author understands it, antiessentialism refers to something that has no inherent meaning, no commonality that makes it open to multiple interpretations and perspectives (Leicester, 2000). This openness to multiple interpretations and a lack of inherent meaning creates opportunities for groups actively to manipulate meaning in a society. In essence, meaning can then be shaped as a tool for the exercise of power. One might
further argue that since there is no conformity to some ideal, there is no cognitive claim of some sort of “truth.”

If we were to reconsider this within a certain discursive context where ideas and communication reflect lived experiences rather than idealized images of communication, we might discover some mechanisms to uncover at least a situational, procedural, or relativistic notion of “truth.” To this end, a mechanism exists that can enable us to reconcile at least some of these issues. Parrhesia (Foucault, 1985) is an idea emerging from Greek society that enables citizens to speak truth to power, and it is different in some ways from how we often view discourse and discursive practices. Specifically, parrhesia, as commonly understood, refers to the ability to speak boldly, openly, and truthfully. To be parrhesia, the user must be less empowered than those being spoken to (e.g. a student speaking to an instructor, or citizen to king). In all cases, there is a relationship to both “truth” and the “duty” to improve the condition through some discourse. This piece explores parrhesia within discussions of Public Administration and citizenship.

**Truth, Parrhesia, and Antiessentialism**

Parrhesia as a concept loosely is understood as free speech or the ability to say anything emerging from ancient Greek, and developed by Foucault (1985, 2001). In practice, it refers to the ability to speak truthfully and openly without manipulation or rhetoric. In essence, this act of discourse requires a few elements to be effective. First, there must be a “truth.” Second, there must be some power disparity among the speaker and person or persons being addressed. Third, there must be some critique and self-reflection. Antiessentialist approaches, regardless of whether they are lived experiences or conjecture, fundamentally alter the nature of parrhesia by affecting the three elements presented above, and how they function in discourses.

If we first examine the notion of truth, we must first understand what is meant by truth. As a starting point, Descartes provides several mechanisms to achieve this. To Descartes (Haldane & Ross, 1955), knowledge must advance the truth (defined as the achievement of certainty). In essence, truth is an end unto itself. From the perspective of antiessentialism, which has strong subjective tendencies, there is often no “T” truth. On the surface, this would appear to make parrhesia fundamentally incompatible with antiessentialist discourses through the requirement for some objective truth or “certainty.” What is interesting however is that according to Descartes (Haldane & Ross, 1955 p. 171), people often cannot know things with certainty. Therefore, if there is no suspicion of fallacy or if a fallacy is not observed, then we have no mechanism to say that the discourse in question is false, even if it might appear false to some higher being (God, angel, etc.).

This idea points toward a bit of common ground among antiessentialist thinkers and rationalist thinkers. In essence, if we define ideas such as truth or knowledge in terms of
unshakable conviction, then one can be thoroughly convinced that their belief is true or certain even though they might in fact be in error. Such belief in truth as a part of conviction, though understood as certainty by some might also be understood as an absolute fallacy by others. In short, truth can be relative. The identification of this issue further affects the practice of parrhesia, since someone might believe he or she is in fact speaking truth to power, even if he or she might instead be speaking rhetoric regarding a problem or issue that is a function of convictions. In fact, Descartes (Haldane & Ross, 1955 pp. 148-149) goes as far as to point to the need for doubting truth, particularly when people believe something a certainty albeit with the goal of developing a clearer logic for truth. Using the language of mathematics and statistics to follow Descartes’ logic is to try to minimize type 1 error.

This leads us to a point of divergence among Descartes and antiessentialist thought. To Descartes (Haldane & Ross, 1955 pp. 179-185), there is a potential for objective truths, though they are a function of logic and clarity. Such a statement flies in the face of antiessentialist discourse as the clash of cultures, subjectivist tendencies, and underlying heterogeneity make it difficult if not impossible for some objective truths to emerge outside the realm of pure philosophy. Furthermore, some antiessentialist discourses can bring to light the limits of accepting the Descartes’ cogito by demonstrating how such processes can be used to establish and maintain power disparities, to oppress, and to marginalize. Additionally, one might easily envision situations where this can happen while maintaining the marks of truth (clarity, logic, and distinctiveness) (Haldane & Ross, 1955 157-171) within existing social and organizational systems.

What antiessentialism then brings into discussions of parrhesia and parrhesiastic activities is twofold. First, is the process by which people seek to uncover the “truth” including injustices, oppression, etc. Second, it encompasses the process by which people discover the “truth” about themselves (“askesis” in Greek), which casts it as an individualistic process compatible with antiessentialism. Furthermore, the introduction of antiessentialist doctrine to the external and internal parrhesiastic removes the taint of progress (Pollard, 1972; Lasch, 1991) and movement toward a positive outcome away from such processes better contextualizing it within contemporary discourses.

“Truth,” in this sense can become a process by which unrealized wrongs (Foucault, 1985 p.7) can be brought to the surface in the context of any number of heterogeneous beliefs and belief systems. Parrhesia and parrhesiastic activities emerge as mechanisms to reconcile a number of the issues being raised by antiessentialist discourses including the recognition of the “other,” (Dean, 1997) the illustration of problematic situations, and even to contextualize formalized oppression.

**Elements of Parrhesia and Public Administration**

To understand how parrhesia works in theory and practice, one must first understand what it “is.” Parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness. There is a certain relationship to his/her own life through danger. There is also a certain type of relation to himself or other people through
criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty (Foucault, 1985 p. 7, 8). Each of these elements can relate to specific discourses and theoretical camps in Public Administration, and might enable us to understand better, how these seemingly divergent ideas “fit” together in some sort of cogent framework.

Duty

The discussion of duty within notions of parrhesia tend to follow the sort of discussions offered by King and Stivers (1998), particularly when one considers that within society in the abstract and in practice. To understand duty in this sense we must also have a basic notion of society and social organizations. Society is understood most easily as a system that provides rational mechanisms (Amable, 2000; Hollingsworth, 1998; Roth & Wittich, 1978), opportunities for civic engagement (Rohr, 1986; Ventriss, 1989; Waldo, 1984; Wamsley et al., 1990), and practices to ensure “order” (Lloyd, 1992; Hobbes, 1997). Additionally, any system of order, used to achieve a task requires certain operational prescriptions (Ramos, 1981), as well as the means and methods to implement such prescriptions (Rohr, 1986, Terry, 1995, Nakamura & Smallwood, 1980; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989).

Within the US framework, there is both an explicit and implicit belief that citizens are somehow “in charge,” either through the voting processes, the provision of labor for public agencies, or the provision of political candidates for elections. Each of these reflects some basic understanding of a civic duty. Additionally, there is a developed body of literature that extends this notion of duty into the realm of citizen participation and engagement (Box, 1998, 2001; King & Stivers, 1998). This is not to say that all participation is in essence good, as others point toward the need for a trained professional class of administrators (Cohen, 1998) to maintain the functions of government. Furthermore, recent cultural and historic events point toward system wide problems that emerge from a number of perspectives on the American state.

Lines of argument such as the “Barzelay-Osborne-Gaebler” (Lynn, 2001 p.146), for example have attempted to move arguments about the why of government back to the how of government undermining the need for citizens while simultaneously conflating “duty” in the civic sense into notions of administrators as functionaries. Though often well intentioned, such an approach rather than fostering notions of democratic governance instead restricts spaces that enable both citizens and administrators to speak truth to power. It in essence undermines parrhesia, by undermining notions of what it means to be an involved administrator (Cooper, 1990; Terry, 1995).

These “new” paradigms of governance including managerialism, marketization, and reinvention often use the language of modernity itself as tools for advantage. In many ways their discourse, actions and processes have at least in practice taken a postmodern turn (Lyotard, 1999) as they adapt to the symbolic politics (Fox, 1996) to address the political ‘reality’ of the moment. This, in turn enables privatization and other non-
governmental solutions (Johnston & Kouzmin, 1998; Dixon & Kouzmin, 2001) to curry favor in the media as well as in both the public, and private sectors.

Simultaneously, we also discover a rise in therapeutic approaches to governance that can be used to limit civic participation (Sementelli, 2006). With the increased use of discourses, processes and methods of psychology and social work, we find it increasingly simple to establish an “other” (Dean, 1997) simply by identifying members of the public as being injured, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to care for themselves. Even though, it was conceived as a method “to break out of the Weberian “iron cage”-out of the alienating existence of life in the machine (Nolan, 1998 p.6), therapeutic language in some situations has the potential to alienate and oppress to a far greater extent than any Weberian conception.

We are left with a contemporary situation that constantly appears to impede the parrhesiastic requirement for dutiful citizenship. Although strategies to reduce if not eliminate the potential for the emergence of an oppressive, leviathan-style of administration, tend to emerge from our understanding of how we in both praxis and theory relate to the public, the people, and their interests. Box (1998) as well as King and Stivers (1998) proffer models of citizen participation, which if properly implemented could help bridge or limit these impediments. However if we believe in the value of civic participation and normative theories of governance (Rohr, 1986, Terry, 1995), there is a consistent need to understand the relationship among Public Administration, truth, and citizenship.

Frankness

If one chooses next to focus on the issue of “frankness” the most logical place to start, at least for the author, would be the discourse theory proffered by Fox and Miller (1996). They have illustrated the importance of frankness through discussions of how “glib, insincere, attention-grabbing symbolic imagery” (p.6) is often used to obscure, undermine, or unbalance discursive communication networks. Their solution in short was to develop a set of warrants for discourse to help identify how to get at “authentic” speech, which then might be applied as a sort of lens to determine the sorts of language games at work in these processes (Wittgenstein, 1953).

This frankness extends to include the sort of candor and honesty that parallels the warrants for discourse offered by Fox and Miller. However, parrhesia as speech is rather different from the discourse proposed, since it by definition involves unequal communication, without necessarily sharing the oxymoronic tendencies attributed to the differing power relationships by Fox and Miller (1996 p. 116). In this sense parrhesia and parrhesiastic communication tend to fall within an understanding of lived experiences and discourses rather than the idealized ones offered by Habermas (1981, 1987) and others.

This notion of “frankness” includes some elements of idealized speech offered by a number of contemporary discourse theorists, especially in Public Administration. It
diverges, however, as we begin to uncover how ideas such as frankness play out when cast in contradistinction with the basic validity claims for discourse (understandability, truth of propositional content, sincerity of the speaker, and appropriateness of speech performance, and autonomy) (Fox & Miller 1996 p. 117). Though parrhesia generally includes some understanding of truth, sincerity, and appropriateness, it lacks certain other elements. Specifically, there is an explicit danger associated with parrhesiastic speech that will be discussed in the next section.

Danger

Parrhesia differs from the sort of discourses favored by Fox and Miller (1996), Habermas (1981, 1987) in the sense that there is often a real element of danger in the process. There is no unencumbered self (Sandel, 1984), no free expression of ideas (Schwarzlose, 1989) no safe lifeworld (Habermas, 1981). Instead, when one chooses to speak truth to power, we find ourselves immersed deeply in the realm of critical theory. Parrhesia is quite compatible with the literature of critical theory, and in many cases might be understood through the processes and experiences that spawned any number of theorists.

Consider for example that scholarship by people such as Gramsci (1971), Freire (2003), and others was typically the product of discourse in response to some oppressive ruling class or social order. Additionally, such scholarship could have emerged from the development or emergence of some power relationships (Foucault 1977, 1980). Regardless of the source, the practice of speaking truth often leads to oppression, not necessarily to unproblematic communication. Critical theorists, in essence want to remove this element of danger from discursive processes by emancipating people from these systems or by developing coping mechanisms (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1992) within existing systems. However, if the element of danger is lost, then the activity is no longer parrhesia, it instead becomes similar to a Habermasian (1981, 1987) idyllic discourse.

Parrhesia recognizes how these systems of oppression often emerge naturally from social systems. In effect, whenever there a substantive shift in power, we find there is an opportunity for parrhesia to occur, possibly even acting as a mechanism for social transformation (Sementelli & Abel, 2000 p. 460), though not necessarily through the sort of calm and rational processes desired by Habermas (1981,1987) and others. Parrhesiastic activities then bring light to hegemonic efforts often at substantial risk to the actor creating spaces for the sort of social change desired by critical theorists. In public administration, this notion of risk or danger might come in the form of “whistle blowing” (Alford, 2001) or other equally dangerous activities.

Thus, parrhesia and parrhesiastic communication typically involve risk to oneself. It does not function as idealized speech for those undertaking parrhesiastic communications can be subjected to any number of consequences. They can be cast as “the other” (Dean, 1997) quite easily, as their speech might be labeled as the claims of a “sick” or ill person (Foucault, 1994; Sementelli, 2006). They can also be labeled as irresponsible, in the sense that they are not trying to help things “work better” (Lynn, 2001; Gulick & Urwick,
1937), or are not acting “American” (Nussbaum & Cohen, 1996) or as good citizens, developing a space to control such people and their speech (Fox, 2003).

Criticism

Criticism, of self and others brings another layer, another nuance to parrhesia and parrhesiastic activity. Parrhesia is by its nature critical, but it also is a right of citizenship. If citizens “cannot use parrhesia, they cannot oppose a ruler’s power” (Foucault, 1985 p. 13). To Foucault then, the right of criticism is an essential check on the power of government. What makes this critical element of parrhesia most interesting is that within the context of its Athenian origins, the right of criticism can be made forfeit; in essence, there are regular processes for stripping someone of their citizenship. As stated earlier, this makes parrhesia and parrhesiastic communication a dangerous game.

Therefore, within a parrhesiastic framework, one must speak boldly, but they must also understand what and how they are saying at the same instance. For example, there is no room for silence (Foucault, 1985 p. 22), no room for “seduction” (p.21) or deception (p. 20). This requires a great deal from the human element in these processes, possibly holding oneself and the discourse in question to an even higher standard than either Habermas (1981, 1987) and possibly Fox and Miller (1996).

In practice, administrators must simultaneously relate to the listener and to clients. They must bring some understanding of certain elements of differential treatment (Thompson, 1975) and advocacy (Cupps, 1977; Kirlin, 2001). This criticism, in many ways speaks to the heart of critical theory, while acting as a sort of mechanism for the anti administration proposed by Farmer (1995), McSwite (2001), and others.

The element of criticism therefore, when combined with the potential for dangers are the two aspects of parrhesia that truly differentiates it from much of the discourse theory in public administration. Parrhesia might, in practice, necessarily be employed at what Fox and Miller (1996 p. 118) might consider an inappropriate time (since it is procedurally might occur after certain discussions. Simultaneously, parrhesia still might fit within public administration discourse theories as part of some agonic (p. 119) approach to communication.

Public Administration, Truth, and Citizenship

We can see then that this concept of parrhesia cuts across a number of theoretical streams in public administration. In essence, understanding the notion of parrhesia and its role in governance provides a much-needed mechanism to frame the variety of discourses, ideas, beliefs, and approaches to the profession. We find that despite many of the obstacles to employing parrhesia, there are significant instances and procedural mechanisms that provide space for parrhesiastic exercises to occur if they are necessary.
Within the framework of parrhesia, the citizen is most often the actor in question, but as King and Stivers (1998) put it, people who work in governmental professions are still citizens. Furthermore, though we have different standards for citizenship in the US when compared to the Athenian democracies, there are a number of informal, formal, and quasi-formal mechanisms that can be used to limit, exclude, or even invalidate a number of civic rights. So even though we do not have a monarch, there is a real possibility for citizens to become alienated (Marcuse, 1970), to become the other (Wolff, Moore, & Marcuse, 1969; Foucault, 1994) through political or other efforts, to become prosecuted (Fox, 2003), or become something less than a citizen (Foucault, 1985).

Public Administration, therefore, is both beneficiary and benefactor for parrhesia and parrhesiastic activities. As argued by Rohr (1986), it can check the power of the electorate. Additionally, one might argue that a powerful mechanism to check power might emerge from parrhesiastic activities. Briefly, it requires something akin to the roles proposed by Fox and Cochrane (1990) or something similar to it as a mechanism to enable this function, while simultaneously requiring some sort of fail safe beyond education and professionalism (p. 105). What we are next left with is a need to examine how parrhesia and discretion relate to one another.

**Truth and Discretion**

Regardless of how you cast the concept of administrative discretion (e.g. managerially, socially, constitutionally), there often is a need or demand for some sort of parrhesiastic action as a corrective for a faltering process, for some breach of public trust, or for some attack on the common good. There are a number of parrhesiastic activities that we expose our introductory students to including the concept of whistle blowing, the Centralia mine disaster, and “How Kristin Died” (Stillman, 2005). All either illustrate the process of or demonstrate the need for parrhesia in practice.

In this sense, parrhesia is a practical requirement for administrative discretion given what we know about authority and responsibility. By authority, I am referring to the sort of relationship between the ruler and those ruled (Peabody, 1964), which tends to fit within the sort of classical approaches to authority and discretion proffered by Friedrich (1958). Parrhesia then represents an implementation of responsible action by subordinates as a mechanism to maintain the proper functions of governance. Briefly, administrative discretion requires parrhesia.

If we add the layers of amateur governance (Cohen, 1998) and postmodern symbolic politics (Fox, 1996), then one might argue that parrhesia becomes even more important given the rise of postmodern conditions and their discourses. Specifically, with the rise of political language games (Wittgenstein, 1953), power shifts, and movements toward conformity (Foucault, 1977, 1980, 1994), the need to speak truth to power becomes rather important, particularly when the “truth” in this sense is a function of culture, position, and other factors. Without parrhesiastic action, citizens and the public generally become susceptible to some group level politics of interest. The rhetoric emerging from this politics of interest then become worsened by a rhetorical shift that allows for “vast
and menacing powers” (Berlin, 2002 p. 95) to alienate, oppress, or otherwise remove citizens from governing processes and their discourses.

Protection (Fox & Cochran, 1990) or at least critique (Foucault, 1985) then falls on the shoulders of administrative bodies. These bodies remain limited by the legal and constitutional traditions that bind them to the larger political context. Despite these limitations, there are certain legal bases for administrative actions (Spicer & Terry, 1996) as well as justifications for the role of Public Administration within the context of an administrative state (Stillman, 1997, Ventriss, 1989; Waldo, 1984). In short, we discover that one of the best spaces for parrhesia and parrhesiastic activity can emerge from within current administrative structures, even though such actions might appear to be going against the mores, beliefs, and structures of the organizations people inhabit (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992).

Speaking Truth to Power-- A Cautionary Tale

Throughout this essay, I have attempted to present Foucault’s (1985) discussion of parrhesia in the context of contemporary Public Administration, and citizenship generally. I have demonstrated how parrhesia and parrhesiastic processes have informed at least implicitly, a number of theories and practices in Public Administration. Additionally, I have pointed toward certain situations, processes, and discursive events that illustrate how parrhesia remains intertwined with our contemporary understanding of citizenship. Finally, I linked these discussions of parrhesia, as well as its elements to demonstrate how parrhesiastic actions are a fundamental part of Public Administration theory and practices.

Concerning antiessentialism, parrhesia, and Public Administration, we find that things become a bit more complex. The development of relativistic discourses, comments about the clash of civilizations, and the systematic deconstruction of “essentialism” makes conducting parrhesiastic action more difficult. Perception, interaction, process, and reflection become far more important. Each mode of interaction between the person invoking parrhesia and the person being spoken to takes on a sort of ritualistic tone (Goffman, 1967) where speaking “truth” could quite possibly become more dangerous as the legitimacy of the speech becomes challenged. This can happen, as stated earlier, through processes of marginalization, alienation, or any of the “othering” processes discussed by critical theorists.

What is left is a sort of procedural reality where people, including citizens, administrators, and politicians can move into situations where parrhesia becomes a viable option. Though quite different in some respects from the discourse theories presented by Fox and Miller (1996), these parrhesiastic processes share a number of the same criticisms and prerequisites for success. Parrhesiastic processes in a number of respects mirror some contemporary discussions of discourse theory, but without the Habermasian (1981, 1987) precedents and with the addition of (1) a power differential (2) danger and (3) the requirement for critique, either as part of self reflection (Schon, 1983) or of others.
In closing, it is apparent that people have been speaking truth to power for a long time. Some trace it to 1955; others track it to 17th century Quakers. In this piece, it has been traced back to Athenian democracy. Many of us until now might have linked it only to Wildavsky’s classic text on policy analysis. In practice, we find that speaking truth to power, an expression of parrhesia, and employing it in contemporary governance might simultaneously be both hazardous to your professional health and one of the most important things a professional can do.
References:


