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Commentary on: Satoru Aonuma’s “Dialectic of/or agitation? Rethinking argumentative virtues in Proletarian Elocution”

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In "Dialectic of/or agitation?: Rethinking argumentative virtues in Proletarian Elocution," Satoru Aonuma breaks new ground in a field largely neglected by argumentation theorists and Marxists alike: the argumentative virtues of revolutionary political speech. I emphasize "revolutionary" in order to raise certain questions concerning the author’s conclusion that Marxist speech be evaluated under the generic rubric of “civic virtues.” I will contend that “civic virtues” are virtues that contribute to the health a given polity. The aim of revolutionary speech, in contrast, is to incite the overthrow of the established order. Good revolutionary speech would thus have the opposite effect of civically virtuous speech.

Aonuma’s paper is an analysis of a neglected text in the history of Marxist and argumentation theory, Eido Kondo’s Proletarian Elocution (1930). I have not read the book—indeed, since it has not been translated into English I could not read the book—but Aonuma’s paper does a effective job explicating its core arguments. Still, since I have not read the book, I have nothing of interest to say about Aonuma’s commentary. My own comments here are thus not so much a critical evaluation of Aonuma’s reading of Kondo’s text as it is an attempt to think along with Aonuma about the general philosophical problem it raises. That general philosophical problem is the degree to which revolutionary speech can be evaluated as a civic virtue. As I have already noted, I do not think this conclusion is sound. Before explaining why not, I need to set my comments in the context of the relationship between argument, rhetoric, and truth.

Aonuma cites Terry Eagleton’s contention that when it comes to political speech, Marxists are obliged to be Platonists. Eagleton’s point—with which Aonuma rightly disagrees—is that Marxist agitators cut through the rhetoric of bourgeois ideology to lay bare the unvarnished truth of capitalism. Marxism is thus committed to uncovering the objective reality masked by bourgeois ideology and setting that reality out for people without adornment, without manipulating emotional flourishes, without rhetoric, in the sense of speech that pleases an audience. The Marxist, like the Platonist, is committed to explaining the truth and nothing but the truth.

But this goal is impossible. Kondo’s text is written with the tradition of classical rhetoric in mind. Political speech must not only be true, it must move...
people. This point is of especial importance for the revolutionary, who aims to inspire in people the courage to challenge and overthrow the ruling class. Hence the Marxist orator must be equally concerned with logic and rhetoric, to making a true case, but to make it in a way that mobilises the masses for the fight a revolution will involve. Revolutionary political argument that proves incapable of motivating political action is not true revolutionary argument. If the argument that revolution is necessary fails to inspire people to revolution, it would seem to be not only ineffective, but untrue.

So far I believe that Aonuma is correct and that one cannot separate cognitive and affective elements in political speech. Political oratory that did nothing but lay out some sort of statistical or theoretical reasons for opposing capitalism would fail utterly to move people in the direction it needs to move people if its proper goal is to be realized. But revolution is not only the goal of Marxist political speech, it is also its truth. When one turns to the question of the truth of Marxist political speech a potential problem of Aonuma’s argument opens up.

Aonuma suggests that we consider Marxist speech as a subset of political speech and evaluate it according to the classical tradition of the civic virtues. But those were virtues instilled to *defend* the polity, whereas Marxist political virtues are virtues instilled in people who want to overturn the established order. Indeed, the *truth* of Marxism as a political theory depends on the extent to which it enables a successful political practice. In other words, Marxism is true if and only if it is possible for the proletariat and its allies to overthrow capitalism and build a free, democratic, socialist society. The role of rhetoric would be to help forge proletarian class consciousness; good revolutionary speech is speech that unites the revolutionary forces against the established order, *including whatever civic virtues it recognizes*.

Aonuma aimed to make no more than a beginning in a new field of research in his paper, and to that extent I think it is an unqualified success. As that project develops, three important questions to consider might be: are there virtues unique to revolutionary political speech? If so, what are they, and what is there relationship to truth, in the ‘Platonic’ sense in which Eagleton invokes it?