Communication & Power
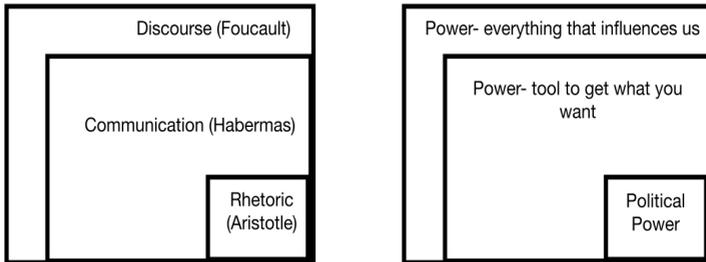
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Abstract

"Communication is, at its heart, a struggle for power and position." To analyse this point is to join a millennia old debate between idealists and empiricists. Empiricists, like Aristotle and Foucault define communication by how it is actually used. Aristotle teaches how to use rhetoric as a tool to gain political power while Foucault mines history to explore the genealogies of power. Idealists, like Jürgen Habermas, redefine an ideal communication, free from the corrupting influences of the struggle for power and position. Counterintuitively, Habermas' ideal can be used as a tool to gain political power, showing that even if you try to separate communication from power, you create a rhetorical tool that can be used to gain power. You cannot separate communication from the struggle for power because this is what it is used for. Communication is, at its heart, a struggle for power and position.

I will first discuss the many terms for communication and power. Then, I will examine why Aristotle's view of communication is consistent with the idea that communication is, at its heart, a struggle for power and position. I will use Aristotle's definitions and terms to restrict and focus the theories of Foucault. Next, I will introduce Habermas' view of the public sphere and theory of communicative action. I will use a Foucauldian analysis to argue that Habermas' theory of communicative action can be rhetorical device used for political gain. While Habermas argues that communication should not be used in a struggle for power and position, I will argue that his discourse about allegedly power-free communication is used in struggles for power and position. Next, I will use Foucault and Aristotle's theories to criticize Habermas' exclusion of strategic acts in his definition of communication. Finally, I will discuss the implications of my study for the study of communication.

Definitions

Communication, Rhetoric, Discourse. To study the link between power and communication, we must specify our terms. The definition of word "communication" can range from spoken utterances, to any form of expression. I will focus my analysis on one form of communication, rhetoric. Rhetoric being the communication used

to discus, argue about, or influence power or shape policies. This view of communication ties closely with rhetoric, and encompasses only part of discourse. By power, I will refer to the ability to get or do what you would like with a focus on the political sphere.

Discourse (Foucault)

Communication (Habermas)

Rhetoric (Aristotle)

Power- everything that influences us

Power- tool to get what you want

Political Power

When I analyse ideal types, I refer to Plato's theory that there is a perfect and pure form of any idea. Under this idealist conception, there is a pure communication that other communications could approach. On the other hand, the empirical or Aristotelian approach would see communication as defined by everything we do when we say we are communicating. Plato's ideal types model is a top down way of generating definitions, while Aristotle's definitions describe what is happening. This is a key distinction in this analysis, because you can separate power and communication if you redefine communication as an ideal type separated from power. If, as in this analysis, you do not use ideal types, communication is defined by how it is actually used.

	Empirical View of Communication: Aristotle +Foucault	VS	Ideal Forms View of Communication: Habermas

Empirical View of Communication: Aristotle +Foucault — To define communication, look at how it is actually used

VS

Ideal Forms View of Communication: Habermas — To define communication, draw from and ideal form

Aristotle + Foucault Introduction

Although separated by two thousand years of history, Aristotle and Foucault's conceptions of the relationship between communication, power and position share striking similarities. Both define communication and power by what they do rather than draw definitions from ideal forms. Aristotle and Foucault are playing the same game with power, but in different directions. Aristotle's works serve as a guide for wielding political power effectively. Communication, for him, is one of the tools, or têcnica to be used to achieve political power or politikê dunamis. Foucault, in his writings, wants us to see how communication is an exercise in power over others by presenting genealogies of power.

Aristotle and the Relationship Between Power and Communication

Aristotle has been interpreted and reinterpreted like a 2000-year game of Chinese Whispers so we must piece back together what he

thought about the relationship between power and communication. To piece together his original arguments, I will draw on the research of Alan G. Gross of University of Minnesota, philosopher Richard McKeon (one of the founders of the neo-Aristotelian Chicago School of Literary Criticism), and Barbara Warnick of the University of Pennsylvania, to piece together Aristotle's original conception of the relationship between power and communication. Although written in ancient Greece, Aristotle's works only re-appeared in Western Europe during the 13th century. His work did not appear in a vacuum- at that time, Cicero, who linked rhetoric to philosophy and ethics, was the most influential figure in the study of rhetoric. Therefore, Aristotle's works were assimilated into the theories of Cicero, Horace, and even Plato. The emotional component of his rhetoric (pathos) was largely stripped away while the logic (logos) of Aristotle, was used in the great renaissance debates between metaphysics and the emerging sciences (Mckeon 1965).

Through these transformations, much of Aristotle's original message was lost. Aristotle's Rhetoric is not meant to be a general systems theory to explain art or philosophy or science. He explicitly classed it it a têchnica, which he defined in

Political Power telos

Rhetoric Economy Strategy têcnica

Aristotle's view on how Rhetoric is linked to power

Nichomanchean Ethics as a craft or art, alongside painting and sculpting. This was an entirely separate category from ethics, which
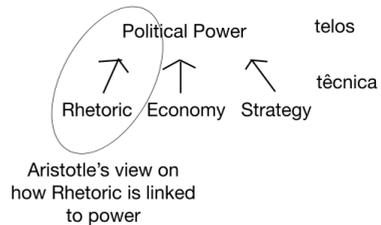
was a phronesis, a way of knowing (Warnick 1989). For Aristotle, rhetoric was a craft, not a way of knowing.

If rhetoric is a craft, how does it link to power? In Eudaimonian Ethics Aristotle lays out ascending hierarchies of têcnica. Têcnica are organized into different hierarchies, each with a difference Telos, meaning larger aim or goal. For example, bridle making is subordinate to horsemanship and soldiery is subordinate to strategy (Gross 2000 pp. 29). In Politics, Aristotle lays out the most important Telos of all, politikê dunamis, which I will translate as Political Power. In Nichomachean Ethics Aristotle lays out the three têcnica needed for political power: Economy, Strategy, and Rhetoric (Gross 2000). Thus, in the Aristotelian conception, rhetoric (or communication) is clearly and unequivocally a tool for political power. For Aristotle, communication is, at its heart, a tool in the struggle for power and position.

Foucault and the Relationship Between Power and Discourse

Michelle Foucault studied the relationship between communication (or more specifically "discourse") and power. In Discipline and Punishment (Foucault 1977 pg.77), he declares that "Power is the capacity to produce truths. Power Produces Knowledge". By producing knowledge, power shapes our norms, the facts, the tools, and the heuristics we use to shape and live our life. In Discipline and Pun-

ishment (1977), Foucault argues that this discursive power is much more powerful than the use of physical force, "The perfection of power should be to render its actual exercise unnecessary" (Foucault 1977 pg. 201). It is a perfection of power because it is cheap (no soldiers needed) and can be enacted simultaneously on many people. As an ideal example of this sort of power, in Discipline and Punishment he examines the Panopticon, a prison where many prisoners are watched by one guard, but never know when they are being watched so must behave at all times.

To Foucault, power is the capacity to communicate. Thus, under his conception, communication is, at its heart, a struggle for power and position. Furthermore, a struggle for power and position, when not achieved explicitly by force, is an act of shaping communications. By shaping what is true or false, right or wrong, normal or weird, communication is the exercise of power.

Reconciling Terminology

One key difficulty in comparing Aristotle and Foucault is finding which words are synonymous. In my analysis of Aristotle, I used rhetoric as a synonym for communication, while for Foucault I used discourse. Rhetoric refers to a very limited, performative type of communication practiced in Ancient Greece. Rhetoric was the art of making legal and political cases in front of the public. Much of the transformation of Aristotle's Rhetoric from the technical guide

he wrote to a general systems theory occurred because the bounds of rhetoric were expanded past what Aristotle originally intended. On the other hand, Foucault stretches out discourse to include all meaning, "Nothing has any meaning outside of discourse" (Foucault, 1972).

Instead of analysing everything Foucault classifies as discourse, or anything with meaning, I will focus on the Aristotelian concept of rhetoric. Aristotelian rhetoric is only a small part of Foucault's larger "discourse", but the fully expanded Foucauldian definition can lead to paradoxes that could bog down analysis (e.g. If we haven't discovered it does it have meaning? or If a tree falls in the forest does it have meaning?) Aristotle's rhetoric is part of Foucault's "Discourse" so reducing the analysis to rhetoric allows you to use both theories. Because rhetoric is part of discourse, if rhetoric was hypothetically shown not to be a tool for power, then discourse would also not be a tool for political gain. For all discourse to be tied power, rhetoric must be tied to power.

I will focus my analysis of Power on Aristotle's politikê dunamis, or Political Power rather than Foucault's definition of power, which flows through any human interaction. Politikê Dunamis is a specific kind of power, and its specificity makes it easier to understand than looking at all interactions between humans throughout time. While it is "politikê" translates easily into "political", Dunamis has a very specific definition. Dunamis, as used by Aristotle in Rhetoric, translates best as "ability" or "faculty" (Haskins 2013) (Makin 2012). So,

I will be view political power as the ability or faculty to achieve one's desired political aims. I use Aristotle's term because it is clearly defined, more specific and is also an aspect of Foucault's power.

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Synthesising Aristotle and Foucault

The statement "Communication is, at its heart, is a struggle for power and position." is true under both Aristotle and Foucault's conceptions of power and communication if by communication we mean rhetoric, and by "a struggle for power and position" we mean political power. Aristotle focuses on the technical side of the relationship, how we can use rhetoric to achieve political power. Foucault focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of how different struggles for power and position are expressed through different forms of commu-

nication. Aristotle's Rhetoric is a "How-to" guide and Foucault's works are genealogies of power. Since Aristotle and Foucault's understandings are not in opposition, I will join them together rather than compare and contrast them. Aristotle's how to guide explains how to use communication to succeed in the struggle for power and position while Foucault looks at the bigger picture of how different struggles for power are enacted through different communication.

Joining Together Aristotle and Foucault

Aristotle: *Rhetoric*- how to use rhetoric as a tool to gain power
Foucault: Study the relationship between power and discourse by exploring geneologies of power and who benefits from different discourses

Both Foucault and Aristotle share the link between power and communication in common. However, others would criticise this relationship. One of the most forceful critics of this conception is Jürgen Habermas of the Frankfurt School. Foucault and Habermas were invited by James Schmit of Boston University to debate each other directly at a conference at the University of California, Berkley, in the fall of 1984 (Schmit 2013). Sadly, Foucault died before the debate, but it might have highlighted the differences between his view and Habermas' view on relationship between power and communication.

Introducing Habermas

Jürgen Habermas, in his "Theory of Communicative Action" tries to strip away power and communication in an attempt to resurrect

the enlightenment ideal of reason as a source of political power. Habermas defines the public sphere as a collection of bourgeoisie joined in a debate of issues relevant to state authority (Calhoun 1992). At the time Habermas analyses, the end of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Enlightenment, the bourgeoisie did not hold any direct political power- this was still held by kings and princes. In this period, known as the Baroque era, kings dazzled their subjects with dazzling displays of power which can still be seen when one walks through Versailles, or visits Van Dyke's extravagant equestrian portrait of Charles I at the National Gallery. Rulers carefully manicured their public personas and perception, justifying their rule through grand analogies and parables (Greenblatt 2005). It was in opposition to this form of power that the public sphere first evolved.

In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas explicitly laid out the public sphere's relationship to political power:

> *The bourgeois were private persons; as such they did not 'rule' Their power claims against the public authority were thus not directed against the concentration of powers of command that ought to be "divided"; instead, they undercut the principle on which existing rule was based. The principle of control that the bourgeois public opposed to the latter - namely publicity - was intended to change domination as such. The claim to power presented in rational-critical public debate (ffentliches Rasonnement),*

> *which eo ipso renounced the form of a claim to rule,*
> *would entail, if it were to prevail, more than just an ex-*
> *change of the basis of legitimation while domination was*
> *maintained in principle (Habermas [1962] 1989: 28)*

Rather than draw power from dazzling performative communicative acts, the public sphere was driven by reason and criticism. The monarchy still controlled political power, but the public sphere had to the power to decide what decisions were legitimate or not. From this historical analysis, Habermas laid out ideal features for or the public sphere. Under his ideal model, debate must occur in a space open to all and the issues discussed must be public, not private matters. Also, status inequalities should be ignored (Jovechelovitch 2011). Drawing from this ideal public sphere, Habermas describes a "lifeworld" from which the public sphere draws on. Habermas describes the lifeworld as "a reservoir of taken-for-granteds, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation." (Habermas 1989). This lifeworld is made up of the individual, their culture, and the society they are in (Jovchelovitch 2011). Under the ideal Habermas system, lifeworlds are created by what he calls "Communicative Acts", which are acts of communication stripped from ego and ulterior motives. Under this communicative act definition, Habermas declares strategic communication as an illegitimate form of communication. Instead, he sees only legitimate goal of communication as mutual understanding (Habermas 1989).

Habermas thus creates an ideal form of communication divorced form a struggle for power. However, this ideal form requires an ideal being with innate rationality which can put aside its ego for the goals of mutual understanding. He is assuming that we are born rational and are all capable of the same rationality, and that egotistical acts are less legitimate than community oriented ones.

Using Habermas' Public Sphere as a Rhetorical Device to gain Power

While, as laid out his analysis of the public sphere, Habermas' view of the relationship between communication and power is that they should be separate, this very discourse can be used as a rhetorical device to gain power. Under his conception of the ideal public sphere, political action by the executive is legitimised by an intellectual bourgeoisie which hold no power except on deciding what is legitimate or not. Under Foucault's conception of power- this itself is a form of power, the power to decide what is legitimate or not. Habermas' model, by seeing rational debate as a source of political legitimacy and power, would empower those most capable of rational debate.

Habermas' ideal system empowers the intelligentsia, while disempowering those less capable of rational debate. Those most capable of rational debate are those with enough education and leisure time to do so. Rationality may also have a socio-economic component,

and studies have found that low socio-economic status might impair critical and abstract thought (Sheehy-Skeffington, 2017 Sheehy-Skeffington & Sidanius 2012). An analysis by Hugo Sperber and Dan Mercer found that reasoning often leads to poor decisions; they see reasoning as an argumentative tool that entrenches existing biases and opinions rather than force a critical re-evaluation. They argue that when people reason, they look at the arguments that are easier for them to justify, irrespective of whether they are better or not (Sperber & Mercer 2011). This research casts doubt on whether Habermas' rational man, for whom the model exists, is even real.

Furthermore, Rationality as a discourse is losing the old monopoly it had a source of legitimacy for exercises of political power in western democracies. In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas argues that public discourse is 're-feudalising' back to a pre-enlightenment area where performativity trumps reason. This is a poor use of the term feudalism, which referred to a period of weak central authority and powerful competing actors, ideologies, and identities. Instead, he is referring to the baroque period, which was a reaction to the feudal period, and featured public displays of power (paintings, palaces, parades, etc.). Loose use of history aside, rationality is losing its monopoly to decide what exercises of power are legitimate. The Public Relations company, Edelman, studied the changes in public trust (Edelman 2016), and found an inversion of influence and authority. While the informed public (Ages 25-63, college educated, in top 25% of household income, report significant media consumption) once held a monopoly

on political authority and influence, the study found that in 2016, around the world, the mass public is becoming more influential than the informed public. This is reflected in the rise of social media over newspapers, magazines, and blogs as sources of information. We are not witnessing re-feudalisation. Instead, we are entering a second baroque era based on drama and performativity over rational debate. While to an intellectual, a member of Edelman's informed public, or Habermas' public discourse bourgeoisie, might look at this shift in terror, this shift has empowered the non-rational over the rational by taking away the intelligence's ability to declare whether or not a use of power is legitimate.

While one can make many arguments in favour of rationality in political decision making over emotions and performativity, arguing that rationality should be the source of political power creates a normative vision of the world in which power should go to the rational. Thus, by attempting to separate rationality from communication and communication from power, Habermas is implicitly communicating that the rational should be those in power. His public sphere discourse, and its facade of objectivity and sensibility, becomes fodder for rhetoric for political power.

This is not only theoretical- Habermas scholars have used his arguments to push for the political empowerment of rational people and rational debate. For example, the American sociologist, and former director of the London School of Economics, Craig Calhoun, began his academic career as a Habermas scholar, writing "Haber-

mas and the Public Sphere" and has consistently argued that social sciences should have more influence on public discourse. He is now president of the Berggruen Institute, with the mission to "develop foundational ideas and, through them, shape political and social institutions for the 21st Century." Its 21st Century Council, brings together entrepreneurs, heads of state, and political thinkers to shape policy. This example explicitly shows how Habermas' public sphere discourse can be used as a tool to gain power and enact a set political agenda. Habermas' criticism of communication's link to power, is itself a discourse which argues that the rational should hold power over what is or is not legitimate.

Habermas' and Foucault's Hypothetical Tête-à-tête

While I do not know Habermas' response to the argument that his ideal model of the public sphere is a discourse that empowers the intelligentsia, Habermas did respond directly to many similar criticisms laid out by Foucault. Habermas directly criticised Foucault in "Critique of Reason, Unmasking the Human Sciences" arguing:

> *Foucault not only historicises; his argument is at the same time nominalist, materialist, and empiricist. He thinks of the transcendental practices of power as something particular that strives against all universals, and further as the lowly corporeal-sensual that undermines everything intelligible, and finally as the contingent that*

could also have been otherwise because it is not governed
by any regulative order. (Habermas 1994 pg. 64).

In this paragraph, he attacks the philosophical underpinnings of Foucault's project of criticising power and creating genealogies of power because Foucault works against universal truths and ideal types. This is clear from Foucault's 1983 interview with Grard Raulet: "I think, in fact, that reason is self-created, which is why I have tried to analyse forms of rationality: different foundations, different creations, different modifications in which rationalities engender one another, oppose and pursue one another." (Foucault 1994). Foucault and Aristotle attack the concept of universal truths and ideal types to emulate, which Habermas defends. If universal truths did exist, and reason was a universal truth, then Habermas' ideal model of public communication would separate power from communication. However, when using an empirical analysis, Habermas' rationality becomes just another "truth" competing with others.

Habermas struck back at this idea in his essay "Modernity versus Postmodernity", calling Foucault a 'Young Conservative' standing against the project of modernity (Habermas 1981). Habermas argues that by denying universal humanist concepts, like rationality, he is rejecting the concepts themselves. However, Foucault is not accepting or rejecting any of these concepts, instead he is creating a genealogy of power and looking at how the humanist concepts are used as tools of power and control (Fraser 1994). There may be many arguments to be made in favour of the rule of the rational,

but we should recognise the idea that power should stem from rationality not as a universal truth, but as a particular form of discourse that could empower a set group of people.

The Problems of Habermas Separating Strategy from Communication

Habermas, when looking for the "essence" of communication, attempts to make communication an unequivocally positive force. He goes so far as separating "strategic" communication from "true" communication, which for him is communication for the purpose of mutual understanding. Implicit, is the idea that strategic activities are something negative, an idea that contrasts with both Foucault, who attempts to analyse strategic actions neutrally and matter-of-factly, and with Aristotle, who's Rhetorica is a guide to strategic communication. Habermas' redefinition ignores both previous definitions, and how we use communication in the real world. To understand why Habermas tries to strip away the strategic aspect from communication, we could place ourselves in his shoes for a moment, a German communications scholar writing partially in response to the atrocities committed by the Nazis trying to separate communication from evil and redefining communication to do so. His redefinition separates communication from some of its effective users (in an Aristotle and Foucault conception), the Nazis, Tobacco Advertisers, Donald Trump, Celebrities.

Aristotle and Foucault do not search for the essence of pure, true communication. They define it by how it is used- strategically. In Aristotle's conception, where communication is a tool for political power, Goebbels, Trump, and the Kardashians are experts in their craft. Using Foucault's conception these dark experts are just another form of discourse and communication, and we should study how the discourses work on us and influence us. Unless we take an ideal types view, that there exists a pure idea of "communication" that all other communication's reach for and approach, communication cannot be split from strategic communication and limited to just mutual understanding as Habermas wishes, it is a tool used to gain power, instrumentalised by Gandhi and Goebbels alike.

How this Adds to Communication Theory

This analysis not only evaluates the theories of Foucault, Habermas, and Aristotle, but also shows the difficulties of reconciling the terms and definitions around communication. Aristotle's view of rhetoric, although ancient, provides clear terminology that benefits from the specificity of the ancient Greek language and can be a valuable tool to cut through some of the vagueness of newer communication's theories. Metaphysics also matter. If one believes in ideal forms, then there is an ideal form of communication that all other communications are only a shadow of. If one instead defines communication by what people do when they say that they are communicating, a completely different definition might arise.

Once terms are restricted and clearly defined, Aristotle's guide to how to use rhetoric to gain power mirror's Foucault's analysis of how rhetoric is used to gain power, and the main difference becomes the direction of the analysis.

Most importantly for communication's theory: Habermas' ideal form of the public sphere, comes with an implicit view of how power should work and who should wield it. Rather than move towards Habermas' ideal model blindly and fervently, we should approach, cautiously, with the knowledge that following his ideal model might empower some groups over others.

Conclusion

"Communication is, at its heart, a struggle for power and position." Aristotle and Foucault agreed that communication was a struggle for power and position. Aristotle wrote a guide Rhetorica to using it in the quest for power and position. Foucault studied the use of communication in the struggle for power. Habermas argued that communication should be an ideal form, stripped away from power struggles, but his argument implicitly supports the empowerment of rational, educated people over irrational, uneducated people. Thus, it can be and is used as a rhetorical tool to justify a particular type of political system, and a particular type of political power. We can try and idealise communication and create a version divorced from reality and humanity, but we will nevertheless continue to use it in

struggles for power and position.

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