RHETORIC

Rhetoric is classically defined as the art of persuasion and eloquence. The history of Western thought might be best understood as a long quarrel between serious reason and rhetoric. From one perspective, science, rationality and enlightenment overcome religion, superstition and magic. A counter-narrative sees in this process only the subordination of visceral, creative pluralism to soulless reason. The quarrel turns on a shared set of opposed pairs: reason versus passion, fact versus opinion; neutral versus partisan — reason versus rhetoric. This opposition underplays the extent to which rhetoric, as a classical discipline, was concerned with the ways in which audiences could be swayed through a combination of both reason and emotion. The epistemological significance of a consideration of rhetoric does not, therefore, lie in completely debunking the idea of truth. Rather, it requires a rethinking of the idea that the task of knowledge is for an observer to represent an independent external reality in a transparent medium; rhetoric’s concern with the joint, shared aspects of gaining assent and persuading others suggests a contextual account of the justification of knowledge and belief.

In geography, rhetoric has become a focus of attention in the wake of a more general revival of interest in this topic in philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, literary studies, and history (McCloskey et al 1987, White 1978, Clifford and Marcus 1986). This engagement has led to a greater degree of reflexivity towards the rhetorical strategies prevalent in the discipline, and how these inscribe particular orientations to audiences and publics. But geography’s treatment of rhetoric has tended to fall into the familiar oppositional pattern noted above. The characteristic reduction of rhetoric to metaphor reinstalls the world/word binary. Interest in rhetoric has therefore been mainly restricted to debunking of the truth-claims of various research fields, as a kind of renewed ideology-critique. On this view, the rediscovery of rhetoric helps us to see that all orthodoxies and norms are really just contingent constructs whose reproduction is neither natural nor reasonable, but is really the effect of rhetorical strategies as part of political agendas.

There remain two areas in which a consideration of rhetoric might still have a creative impact on research agendas in human geography. Firstly, the rhetorical-responsive account of action, practice and subjectivity developed by Shotter (1993), and building on the tradition of Austin, Bakhtin, Burke, Harré, Ricouer, Vygotsky, Wittgenstein and others, retains its potential for redeeming the concept of discourse from the prevalent representational construal to which it has been subjected in geography, by returning it to a fuller sense of language-in-use and language-oriented-to-action. This in turn would have implications for methodological analysis of both archival data and talk-data generated in interviews, focus-groups, and ethnographic situations. Secondly, understanding rhetoric as the effort to move and affect audiences through various modes of appeal and persuasion points towards an alternative approach to the analysis of
public space that investigates the different types of rhetorical force that are deployed to convene publics (Barnett 2006).

References

Suggested Reading