

Retoryka różnych perspektyw Rhetoric of various perspectives

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RECENZJA/REVIEW

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Recenzja/Review: Ofer Feldman (ed.), *Debasing Political Rhetoric: Dissing Opponents, Journalists, and Minorities in Populist Leadership*, Springer 2023 and Ofer Feldman (ed.), *Political Debasing: Incivility, Contempt, and Humiliation in Parliamentary and Public Discourse*, Springer 2023

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This pair of complementary books, *Debasing Political Rhetoric: Dissing Opponents, Journalists, and Minorities in Populist Leadership Communication together with Political Debasing: Incivility, Contempt, and Humiliation in Parliamentary and Public Discourse*, charts a comprehensive and highly informative review of such subjects as impoliteness, incivility and political debasement in the contemporary democracies consistently remaining under the threat of opportunistic strongmen. While the former collection concentrates on statements of specific national leaders in the public realm (even taking into consideration the politicians' informal activities when these statements are voiced), the latter is devoted to analyzing the language of selected political leaders, such as Donald Trump (USA), the recently re-elected Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, together with the former presidents Rodrigo Roa Duterte (Philippines), and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil).

The latter volume also covers political discourses of parliamentary exchanges, including Spanish politicians' adversity in the parliamentary as well as social media setting resulting in an increased level of incivility (Chapter 2). Chapter 4 traces incivility in the case of British politicians, with a special emphasis on a sample of five (deputy) Prime Ministers addressing the parliament. The focus of Chapter 5 is how irony, ridicule and politeness (or lack thereof) are recruited as frequent rhetorical tools by Japanese politicians sarcastically addressing specific social groups. In Chapter 6, the study interrogates the manners in which the derogatory language of Chinese leaders has changed after Mao Zedong. The contributions also include Hindu political context (Chapter 7) showing the extent to which Indian culture supplements the literal denotations of class, origin and gender, thus influencing the overall level of political debasement. In Chapter 8 the analysis

draws on Montenegrin public discourse and the way different uncivil labels, through lexicalization, serve wider rhetorical purposes to reap political profit. Additionally, Chapters 9 and 11 map the Israeli and Greek political figures using debasing language to create a hyper-aggressive perception of politics, targeting different societal groups and evoking polarization among ordinary citizens. The other diverse and rich set of contributors to *Debasing Political Rhetoric...* provide valuable insights into the Dutch (Chapter 4), Australian (Chapter 7) and Italian (Chapter 10) political contexts of populist debasement discourse. The studies investigate utterances of demeaning, derogatory language voiced by selected political figures with the aim of decreasing the status of their opponents. The publications are an international endeavor under the editorial guidance of Ofer Feldman (Faculty of Policy Studies, Doshisha University Kyoto, Japan) and have been published within the new Springer's series "Language of Politics."

Ultimately, the aims of the dual publication are to: (1) characterize, recognize, and assess the theoretical and practical features of linguistic debasement in language, especially its performative functions and tangible consequences within the broad political discursive context; (2) identify the targets of the debasing language, be they journalists and societal groups, or singular individuals being scapegoated for rhetorical purposes; (3) investigate the general context in which debasing through language is recruited to certain effects, e.g., parliamentary settings, heated election campaigns, social media platforms or interviews; (4) scrutinize the grounds behind the social, political, and psychological motives for such discourses; (5) inspect the far-reaching consequences of debasement in the national political cultures; (6) suggest ideas to further promote the scholarly projects as well as start a public debate on the features of debasement discourse in the political realm.

Furthermore, the two books center the discussion on the language through which debasement, incivility, impoliteness, etc. are employed to mediate specific constructions of political realities. It is worth drawing attention to the language uses induced by ubiquitous presence of social media, hungry-for-sensation media, and the ever-increasing citizen polarization. This often leads to the diminishing role of logos and ethos for the sake of pathos in the public sphere and makes the task of a well-mannered political exchange ever more difficult, as if the rhetorical principle of "speaking well" was no longer applicable and accessible to political actors. However, the importance is put especially on the verbal communication of politicians across a wide array of cultures and nations, leaving the non-verbal one as a potential point of interest for future research. Given the wide scope of the two-volume publication, only selected chapters will be discussed as highlights and outstanding contributions.

In the first chapter of *Political Debasing: Incivility, Contempt, and Humiliation*

in *Parliamentary and Public Discourse*, Ofer Feldman, the editor and initiator of the two volumes, starts with a conceptualization of political debasement as “the use of derogatory language, often by employing rhetorical devices as irony, cynicism, sarcasm, mockery, and ridicule, to strongly demean or degrade a certain target in the polity, especially those involved in the political process” (p.1). This definition is referred to consistently in subsequent chapters. It is worth bearing in mind that debasement and incivility are two disparate concepts in the public discourse as proven by adequate instances. Additionally, Feldman proposes that political debasement be understood in a narrow and broad sense, as well as in an operationalized way through which a proper analysis and appraisal should be conducted. The components playing an integral part in a relationship between debasers and targets are placed under close scrutiny together with an effective model of eight factors facilitating accurate identification of potentially debasing language in the future research. For greater clarity, these components are listed individually with an accompanying set of questions, which are useful working templates when employed in future studies.

Chapter 3 authored by Debbita Ai Lin Tan presents both the current state of debasement language in the Malaysian parliament as well as a comprehensive description of the recent history of Malaysia. The example is worth close scrutiny as Malaysia is a nation with a rich multicultural background, comprising Malaysians, Chinese and Indians having to overcome both a politically and socially tumultuous past. As a result, mapping the outcomes from political conflicts arising from conflicting interests is a contribution to current discussions in the ever-increasing multiethnic Western world which has grappled with the issues of migration on a larger scale. Even in a country which places a great value on saving face together with the attitudes and behaviors it entails, the level of incivility has seen a recent rise. The study emphasizes that directness, as a cultural element, “can sometimes be perceived as offensive [...] heeding the feelings of others, viewing it as a mark of good upbringing” (p. 56), which is of note when discussing the heated political language verging on debasement. It must be underlined that a clear definition of debasement is provided: “derogatory speech that typically offends, devalues or discriminates against an individual or out-group” (p. 59). This, together with a rich illustrative material of 13 years of analysis (2007-2020) undoubtedly is the paper’s forte. Additionally, it is shown how a range of rhetorical devices, such as the “Us” vs “Them” division, derision or name-calling, is employed to reduce the worth of a political opponent and, subsequently, by using a specific sense of humor, to attract attention from a wider audience, even beyond the traditional electorate.

Chapter 6 in *Debasing Political Rhetoric Dissing Opponents, Journalists,*

and Minorities in Populist Leadership Communication by Ronald A. Pernia and Rogelio Alicor L. Panao, approaches the issue of debasement from a surprisingly innovative angle. The authors propose a name for the former president Duterte’s rhetoric calling it “paternalistic cussing” aiming to “reassure a culturally conservative constituency that privileges order, discipline, and social stability” with an effect of “preach[ing] tough love to protect citizens and maintain law and order” (p. 89). What is worthy of note is that the article portrays an instance of political debasement where such rhetoric is employed primarily in the leader’s working environment (anti-drugs campaign). Moreover, such an attitude was met with a positive public reception placing great value on the concepts of hierarchy or collectivism. The authors have attempted to show something more than a pure example of a loud, toxically hyper-masculine leader, but one demonstrating characteristics of a father addressing a naughty offspring to behave properly. In addition, Duterte’s rhetoric is described in terms of strategically conscious choices and “dispel the myth of a mindless demagogue”. An unquestionable advantage of the studies is the incorporation of constructive criticism of those who “resort to populism as a convenient label” (p. 90-91).

As for the recent evolution of incivility in political discourses in Poland, Agnieszka Kampka and Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska (Chapter 10) exemplify derisive comments by selected politicians holding office since 2015. The article investigates how a wide array of rhetorical and stylistic devices, for example the division into “Them” and “Us,” historical analogies, name-calling and even vulgarity, has been recruited to gain wider political support. It is interesting to note that despite the proud claim of the contemporary political elites to be a democratic voice of the people, their rhetoric bears close resemblance to the communist-era style, employed to polarize conflict, intensify crisis and discredit any kind of ideological criticism. Consequently, the actual level of debasement in Polish political discourse has been on the rise with the “normalization of shamelessness” (p. 192). In addition, the distinct characteristics of populist rhetoric are noted, e.g., citizen-orientation, playfulness (derision, irony) and spectacle (grand patriotic undertones). The authors pinpoint the examples of conflating facts with “threats”, extensive deployment of political metaphors, and the dichotomy of tradition vs progressivism applied for legitimizing the governments’ policies. The statement that “incivility is by no means restricted to one party or orientation” (p. 192) summarizes best the article’s attempt to provide a detailed and well-balanced view of the current level of Polish debasement in line with other international academic work conducted on political debasement. Ultimately, the article’s presentation of conceptual development and findings is accessible to non-specialists, too.

Chapter 12 in *Political Debasement: Incivility, Contempt, and Humiliation in Parliamentary and Public Discourse together with 13 Debasing Political Rhetoric Dissing Opponents, Journalists, and Minorities in Populist Leadership Communication* by Sam Lehman-Wilzig provide some significant observations on the realm of political debasement, belonging to a sub-field of political communication, which should be borne in mind when applying it in future research. Despite “occasional disjunction between academic terminology and common semantics” (p. 233), methodologically speaking, debasing terms may be graded from the lightest to the most severe using a tool called “Intensity Scale of Invective.” Consequently, any leader’s rhetoric may be examined to reveal their influence on shaping the broader context of political rhetoric and more specifically political debasement — or whether it is only a question of socio-cultural change more generally. The author even entertains thought-provoking questions of whether lying should or could be classified as political debasement and offers a fine-grained context of a lie (*Debasing Political Rhetoric. Dissing Opponents, Journalists, and Minorities in Populist Leadership Communication*, p. 224). The issues are discussed in a reader-friendly manner which encourages a swift access to the content, with frequent addition of a subtle sense of humor.

However, some major questions of the dual publication should be mentioned as they touch on polarizing socio-political issues affecting politicians as well as regular citizens. Where, or even more importantly, who will decide on what sort of language is deemed acceptable or not? No matter how one looks at it, such a person or institution will possess a sort of moral agency in matters concerning freedom of expression which is a bedrock of liberal democracies. The question remains whether the new tools of limiting political debasement will decrease the overall level of polarization, or the employment of the rhetorical strategy of dividing “Us” vs “Them,” and promote a partner-like political disagreement or not. What is said and how it is perceived stand at the heart of political discourse or discourse more generally. Semantic changes over time, dissimilar audiences, or invective ambiguity are only a few urgent factors which future researchers will have to take seriously into consideration when conducting their studies to counteract the deterioration of deliberation leading to a distressing loss of faith in democracy altogether.

Nevertheless, this dual publication’s undeniable forte is that its contributors not only finish each of their articles with a tangible recommendation for the potential scientific area worth researching in the future, but that the scholars put into practice the variety of concepts from academic disciplines such as linguistics, political science, social and political psychology as well as communication. Additionally, the collections offer a rich methodological source of inspirations, with a variety of

techniques that had been employed to gather and analyze adequate data, ranging from more traditional media material, TV news, transcripts of parliamentary sessions, interviews to more modern ones as social media platforms, which have played a crucial role in the political debasement rhetoric and politics in general.

Methodologically, zooming in on political debasement is a helpful way of discovering what the most vital issues in a specific society are. It is worth underlining that the issue of political debasement should be approached as being entrenched in a variety of contexts, including the political and socio-cultural ones. Even by taking into consideration personality aspects most prominently featuring in a specific society, it may provide a bigger picture no matter whether it is a country or culture where saving face is important. Cultural norms and practices influence the overall scope and nature of debasement practices (as seen among others in Chapters 3, 5 in *Political Debasement Incivility, Contempt, and Humiliation in Parliamentary and Public Discourse* and 8 in *Debasing Political Rhetoric Dissing Opponents, Journalists, and Minorities in Populist Leadership Communication*).

The conclusion is that the occurrence of the high degree of debasement in one nation may not necessarily be viewed as out of the ordinary or even be condemned in another one. Not to mention the wider rhetorical and stylistic diversity and incivility acceptance levels among minority cultures, or within different interest groups of the society. Notwithstanding the exhaustiveness of this publication, it would be interesting to include research on political debasement in Germany, particularly by looking how seven “German cultural standards and orientation patterns” (Kinast, Schroll-Machl, and Thomas 2010, 23), and the proposed Intensity Scale of Invective fit together. It is possible to study a cornucopia of heated political topics in Germany such as new waves of immigration, the democratic win of the first ever governing post by a far right-wing politician, the highly contentious Buildings Energy Act and the effect these issues have and will have on the rhetoric of political debasement.

It should be emphasized that the two volumes provide insights into a wide array of countries, which demonstrate that the phenomenon of political debasement is not confined purely to the Western world, or that it is a by-product of the Western, liberal democracies, but has had its share in various inflections globally. Sam Lehman-Wilzig summarizes the discussed concept best as having “real-world applications in restoring and strengthening civic politics and the democratic system of government” (*Political Debasement Incivility, Contempt, and Humiliation in Parliamentary and Public Discourse*, p. 244).

Bibliografia

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