

Negotiating Identities : Exercising Empathy

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The beginning of the 21st century is a time of identity crisis (Dunn: 1998; Morley & Robins: 2002). Due to the flattening of the world (Bird & Stevens: 2003; Friedman: 2006), it becomes increasingly difficult for an ever-growing number of people to view their beliefs and values as universally valid. This challenge to old certainties also has a profound impact on human and social sciences. In particular, the ideal according to which a researcher could escape from social and cultural determinism became suspicious (Foucault: 2002); the allegedly objective standpoint of science, it was argued, was in fact a “WEIRD” point of view: the ethnocentric perspective of the Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (Thompson: 1963; Said: 1978; Chakrabarty: 1992; Henrich *et. al.*: 2010). From then on, it became important for researchers to face two questions: what is my identity? How does it inflect my work? This special issue of *Rhetor* is an opportunity for rhetoric scholars to answer them. What if, however, one rejects those questions? Aren't they a concession to the postmodern view that any scientific work is influenced by culture and ideology (Latour & Fabbri: 1977; Spanier: 1995)? Are we bound to abandon the ideal according to which doing research requires us to escape from particularism and ethnocentrism?

This is precisely the controversy I am interested in as a researcher (Ferry & Danblon: 2016). As a professor and a trainer, I am also specialized in the management of conflicts arising from multiculturalism (Ferry: 2017a). In this essay, I show how I found in rhetoric the tools to handle those issues, whether they are theoretical or on the ground. In conclusion, I reflect on how French culture might have inflected my approach to controversies and conflict resolution.

Can We Share a Common History?

In my doctoral thesis, I focused on the writing of history in a multicultural society: can there be shared interpretations of sensitive historical events? Should historians approach them with a certain tact? If so, what is the boundary between tact and self-censorship? The reason why I find those questions so stimulating has to do with my teenagehood in a multicultural suburb of Paris. In this context, several units of the history class were highly sensitive: slave trade, colonization, the Algerian war. I regret that we didn't seize the opportunity at that time to put words on our diverging perceptions of France and its history. Maybe we wouldn't have been able to engage in fruitful intercultural disagreements. Maybe those subjects were just too sensitive. In any case, the hope that it should be possible to ease the tensions by confronting perceptions has been with me since the beginning of my career.

When I began my Master's degree, however, the issue of the writing of history in multicultural societies seemed unlikely to lead to any peaceful discussion. French society was then divided over memory laws (i.e., laws on state-approved interpretations of crucial historical events). For some, this was a dangerous attack against free speech. For others, this was a safeguard against ethnic or racial hatred. In this debate, I had been especially interested by a controversy that broke out after the publication of a book on the slave trade (*Les traites négrières*, by Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau). Indeed, the author had been orthodox in his attempt to reach a neutral standpoint when

dealing with such a sensitive subject. Although the book had been praised by historians, it shocked associations of remembrance of slavery: the author was accused of neglecting the suffering of the victims of slavery and he was even prosecuted.

In my doctoral study, under the direction of Emmanuelle Danblon, I proposed a rhetorical analysis of this controversy (Ferry: 2013, 2015a). One source of the conflict was, in my view, that professional historians tend to care only about their *logos* even when dealing with sensitive issues. The risk is then not to appear as objective but as insensitive. On this, Aristotle's concept of appropriate emotions is enlightening: "Your language will be appropriate if it expresses emotion and character, and if it corresponds to its subject" (Rhet., III, 7). But is it the role of a historian to care about the public's opinion? The postmodern tendency to blur the distinction between science and politics was probably another source of the conflict: without this distinction, anyone can denigrate any scientific production simply because he feels offended. The solution might be, following Aristotle, to reaffirm the difference between genres of discourse. As far as history is concerned, there is a time to establish the truth, a time to judge the guilty, and a time to celebrate the heroes. Training young citizens to navigate between those genres should help the teaching of the most sensitive chapters of history (Ferry: 2017b).

After dedicating my PhD to epistemological conflict resolution, I had the opportunity to develop my skills for facilitation as teacher and a trainer in rhetoric.

The Laboratory of Disagreement

At the beginning of 2014, I started to teach rhetoric, argumentation, and intercultural dialogue in a communication and management school. Most students in this school were born and raised in Africa before pursuing their higher education in Europe. Some of them were Muslim, some of them

were Christians. In the classroom, there was a lot of potential for cultural conflicts (including between them and me); there was also a huge potential for mutual enrichment. To profit from it, I created an exercise entitled the laboratory of disagreement (Ferry & Sans: 2014; Ferry: 2015b, Ferry & Sans: 2015). It worked as follows. At the beginning of the semester, I would ask my students to identify their tolerance threshold: a subject on which it was difficult for them to have a calm and peaceful conversation. The idea was that sensitive subjects are likely to reveal cultural differences (Cohen-Emerique: 2011). They would offer an opportunity to observe how disagreement works and to exercise conflict management skills. Each course was divided into a practical part and a theoretical part. In the practical part, one student would briefly present his/her opinion on the sensitive subject of his/her choice. Other students would then try to push him/her out of his/her comfort zone. They would finally evaluate his/her performance using a 4 item feedback form:

- (1) Introspection (Is the student aware of his/her culture?);
- (2) Empathy (Is the student aware of others' points of view? Does he/she care about them?);
- (3) Emotional intelligence (Is the student able to control his/her emotions and is he/she mindful of others' emotions?);
- (4) Rhetorical agility (Is the student able to change the course of a discussion when it becomes heated?).

In the theoretical part of the course, I would give them concepts to enrich their experience of disagreement. This was a highly challenging, very interesting experience. And, above all: it worked. It worked in the sense that students began to enjoy disagreements more and more. It also worked in the sense that, in the end, we were able to disagree on subjects as sensitive as polygamy, excision, abortion, the wearing of the hijab, or colonisation in a peaceful and stimulating way, and I also learned a lot in this respect.

In 2015, I began to share my tools and methods by giving training for high school teachers. This was one of the most gratifying things I had the chance to do: bringing research results to people who might actually find it useful.

Exercising Empathy

After working “on the ground”, I moved back to the academic world. Thanks to a grant from the Fund for Scientific Research in Belgium (FNRS), I began, in October 2016, a project entitled “Exercising empathy.” Although empathy seems to be a key skill for conflict management, there are few studies on how to exercise it. Social psychologists offer tools to measure empathy (Lawrence et al.: 2004); humanities scholars have intuitions on the activities that might stimulate it (Nussbaum: 2003; Kidd & Castano: 2013). Borrowing from both sides, my research project was to test whether ancient rhetorical exercises could develop our skill for empathy. To do so, I developed a rhetorical training program. I also developed a measurement tool that students might use to give each other feedback on how to improve their empathy when discussing sensitive issues (Ferry: 2017a).

Conclusion: Universal Audience and French Idealism

A professor of political sciences at the Free University of Brussels (ULB), Paul Magnet, once told us: “There are two nations who believe they can speak on behalf of the entire world: the American and the French.” This joke reveals something true about French culture. Indeed, I have to confess a sympathy for the narrative according to which the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was an important step for humanity as a whole. I am also attached to the Enlightenment’s ideal according to which the progress of science, reason, and education will, one day, give birth to a global citizenship. Conversely, I find suspect the idea according to which some cultural or ideological differences are so deep that any

attempt to find a common ground is bound to fail (Fogelin: 1985; Angenot: 2008; Kraus: 2012). However, leaving France for a career in Belgium and, later, specializing in intercultural communication made me immune to definitive answers on ethical and political issues. My readings of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) and, in particular, their concept of a universal audience, helped me to find a compromise between idealism and realism as far as disagreement resolution is concerned. As they put it: “Everyone constitutes the universal audience from what he knows of his fellow men, in such a way as to transcend the few oppositions he is aware of” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 33). This does not mean that a speech can actually transcend all oppositions. It rather means that the more aware we are of others’ opinions, the wider our audience might be. The aim of my career is to provide citizens the tools to reach an ever more universal audience.

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