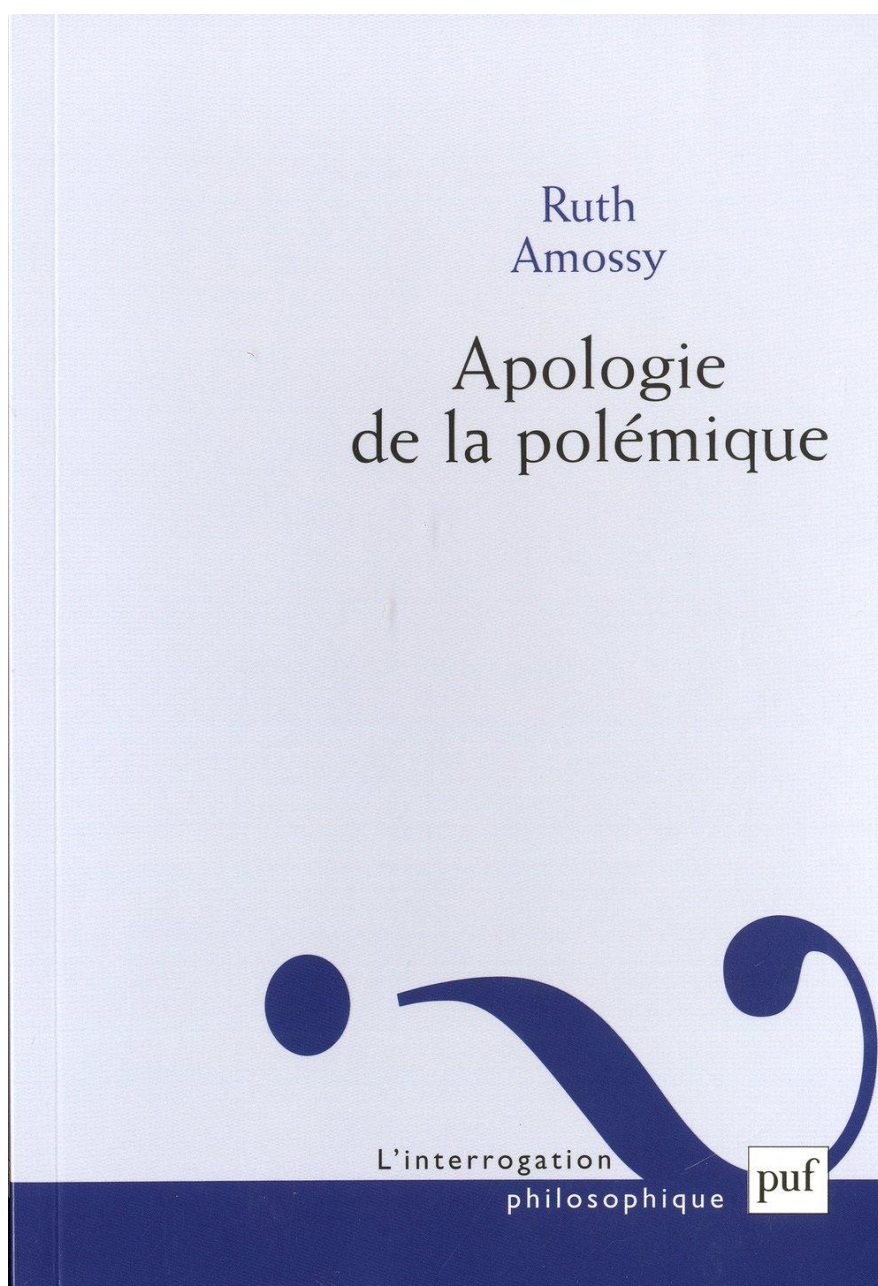


AMOSSY, R. *Apologie de la polémique* [*Apologia for Polemics*]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014. 240 p. [Coleção L'interrogation philosophique/ The Philosophical Interrogation Series].

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The book *Apologie de la polémique* [*Apologia for Polemics*] is Ruth Amossy's most recent work in French. She is a merited professor of the French Department of the University of Tel-Aviv and the director of the Research Group called *Analyse du discours, Argumentation & Rhétorique* (ADARR) [Discourse Analysis, Argumentation, and Rhetoric].¹ As a result of a global research at the Israel Science Foundation (ISF) about polemic discourse in democratic spheres, the work was published in March of 2014 by the Presses Universitaires de France [University Press of France] in the book series *L'interrogation philosophique* [The Philosophical Interrogation], edited by the philosopher Michel Meyer, who is a renowned researcher in the field of Rhetoric and Argumentation and a professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

Based on a precise theoretical and methodological framework and on a detailed analysis of concrete cases – and considering that polemics are undoubtedly not “disordered communication” – Amossy shows that despite being depreciated, public polemics, as an argumentative modality, play an essential role in pluralist democracies. The book is organized in three parts. In the Introduction, concerning the presence of polemics in contemporaneity, the author emphasizes that conflicts of opinion have a preponderant place in political scenarios and that mass media do not stop forging and spreading many varied polemics supposedly of public interest persistently. An instance of it is the constant use of the term “polemic” in the French printing news (*Le Monde*, *Libération*, etc.).² According to the author, this presence could be explained by the fact that citizens and politicians are incapable to follow rules of rational debate and by the perverse curiosity of the audience about the spectacle of verbal violence. Considering this fact, Amossy defends the necessity to investigate the deep nature (the functioning and the social functions) of conflictual debates upon which democracy in a pluralist

1 The author of *L'argumentation dans le discours* [Argumentation in Discourse]. Paris: Nathan, 2000; Paris: Armand Colin, 2012 and *La présentation de soi: ethos et identité verbale* [The Presentation of the Self: *Ethos* and Verbal Identity]. Paris: PUF, 2010, Amossy is also the editor-in-chief of the online journal *Argumentation et analyse du discours* [Argumentation and Discourse Analysis].

2 To illustrate that the polemic discourse is present in many varied discursive spheres, in my PhD dissertation I analyzed polemics in the artistic sphere, specifically in Brazilian popular music (CARLOS, J. T. Fosse um Chico, um Gil, ou um Caetano: uma análise retórico-discursiva das relações polêmicas na construção identitária do cancionista Belchior. [Neither Chico nor Gil nor Caetano: A Rhetoric and Discursive Analysis of Polemic Relations in Building the Identity of the Composer Belchior]. 686 p. PhD dissertation – Discourse Analysis – Graduate Department in Philology and Portuguese, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, 2014).

society is currently sustained. Based on discursive studies, Social Sciences and the reflections of Habermas, Perelman, Mouffe, among others, the author is concerned with how, in a public and democratic space, polemics are built on discursive and argumentative level and model communication. As to researchers' stances and the methodological questions in the observation of polemic debates, the author calls the attention to the fact that analysts should never become polemicists. They should examine controversies (their origins, regulation, and social roles) but should never take a stand for *one side or another*.

The First Part of the book presents the theoretical reflections of the work and is divided into two chapters, the first of which is entitled *Managing Disagreement on Democracy: For a Rhetoric of Dissensus*. In it, Amossy approaches the insistent search for consensus and the obsession with agreement, the basis of Rhetoric and studies on persuasion, from Aristotle's classical Rhetoric to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's new Rhetoric. At the same time, she describes the condemnation of dissensus and polemics in contemporaneity from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *Traité de l'argumentation [Argumentation Treaty]*³ to the successive theories of argumentation, such as Douglas Walton's informal logic and the Pragma-dialectics of the School of Amsterdam and of Van Eemeren. In this chapter, the author also evokes the work of Habermas, in which he elaborates the notion of public space generated by argumentative discourse. In other words, according to the German author, the public sphere is based on a model of rational discussion in which the citizens reach an agreement through discursive exchange. In addition, Amossy discusses another function of dissensus (or divergence): she introduces a different theoretical approach and places new value to dissensus in different domains, especially in Sociology and Political Sciences. Thus, based on reflections offered by Lewis A. Coser, George Simmel, Chantal Mouffe, and Pierre-André Taguief, which stem from Social Sciences, the author asks the following question on page 37: "May sociopolitical perspectives be translated in terms of rhetoric in order to authorize polemics and their constructive functions?" Amossy sustains that, if in a pluralist democracy, conflict is inevitable and utopian, it is necessary to develop a

3 PERELMAN, C.; OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, L. O. *Traité de l'argumentation: La nouvelle rhétorique*. 6. ed. Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2008. [1st edition in 1958]. [PERELMAN, C.; OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, L. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Indiana, USA: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991].

rhetoric of dissensus, in which polemic confrontation must be seen as useful and irreversible in dealing with conflicts.

In the following chapter, entitled *What are Polemics? Issues on Definition*, the author recalls categories, such as debate, discussion, dispute, quarrel, altercation, and controversy. She is interested in introducing the specificity of polemics. For that, she bases herself on the lexicographic definitions of dictionaries, current discourse, and the conceptualizations of researchers in language sciences. Amossy analyzes two examples of polemics: the first one is about a “politically incorrect” photograph that shows the back of a man who uses the French flag as toilet paper; the second is the actor Gerard Depardieu’s self-imposed tax exile after President François Hollande’s project for tax reform in 2002. From the analysis, the author declares that a polemic is indeed a debate about a current issue of public interest present in many varied genres (leaflets, articles of opinion, among others) and in different types of discourses (journalistic, political, among others), which must be distinguished from ordinary deliberation.

Amossy then evaluates polemics of public interest as an argumentative modality, perceived in a continuum: dichotomization (clash of opposite opinions in mutual exclusion), polarization (two antagonists, who are opposite one another, engage in polemics before the audience, who is also expected to take a stand), and disqualification of the adversary (depreciation of the ethos of subjects, groups, ideologies, and competing institutions). Along the entire work, all the chapters will bring these modalities in varied text genres,⁴ investigated in their discursive materiality and argumentative configuration. They also provide explanation for the following questions: How do discursive polemics work? How are public polemics developed? What is the role of rationality in polemics? How does one understand the role and the limits of violence?

From this viewpoint, the second part of the book will focus on the modalities of polemics in the media, exemplified with women’s status in two different public spaces: France and Israel. Before the analysis, the author states that it is necessary to distinguish polemics from polemic discourse and polemic interaction. Polemics refer to the set of antagonistic interventions in a given issue at a specific moment. Polemic discourse, in

4 Amossy asserts that the peculiarities of each text present general marks that explain the nature and the functions of the global phenomenon of polemic discourse.

turn, defines, as postulated by Kerbrat-Orecchioni, the discursive production of each antagonistic part, in which the discourse of the Other is inscribed. Polemic interaction corresponds to the interaction – be it face-to-face or not – in which two or more adversaries engage in an oral or written discussion, always reporting to one another. While polemic discourse is intrinsically dialogical, but not dialogal, polemic interaction is by definition dialogal.

Based on this theoretical distinction, in chapter 3, Amossy focuses on polemic discourse and interaction. She analyzes the context of the burka ban from June of 2009 to October of 2010. The ban prohibited the wearing of burka in French public spaces. Thus, she gives an example of polemic discourse by analyzing an article of opinion signed by Bénédicte Charles in the leftist magazine *Marianne* (June, 2009). She examines the following aspects: the actancial structure and the plays of dichotomies, the plane of enunciation and journalistic responsibility, polemics as a media event, polarization in the printing news, and journalists as polemicists. As for polemic interaction, she explores it in two examples: a face-to-face interaction on the TV broadcast debate between politician Jean-François Copé and the “woman in veil,” and two posts in an e-forum that respond to the article in *Marianne*. By qualifying polemics as *polilogue*, which is beyond dialogue, Amossy outlines that both polemic discourse and polemic interaction play important roles, such as denouncement, protest, call for action, and entertainment.

In Chapter 4, the author illustrates public polemics with the *formula* “the exclusion of women” in Israel. She analyzes the news report in December of 2011 about young Tanya Rosenblit, who took a bus ride from Ashdod to Jerusalem and sat in the front of the bus. By doing that, she confronted the practice by which women must always sit in the back of the bus so that men are not able to look at them. The episode had a wide public repercussion from the press (media that are for or against the ultra-orthodox), turning it into a debate about ideology and identity.

Amossy asserts that this polemic, having both religious and non-religious discourses as protagonists, not only turned the young Rozenblit into a symbol of resistance against religious fanaticism, but also showed that even if antagonistic forces do not directly converse, do not have mutual understanding and do not come to an eventual agreement about the notions of public space, about the role of religion in the

State and about individual liberty in a democracy, they eventually communicate insofar as they deal with the same referents and agree about the necessity for discussion. From this apparently contradictory viewpoint, public polemics, as agonistic interaction, permit coexistence in dissensus through its social functions, which bring people with extremely opposite opinions together.

In the third and last part of the work, also divided into two chapters, Amossy analyzes the place of reason, passion, and violence in public debates. In Chapter 5, *Rationality and/or Passion*, she questions if *pathos* is a distinctive trace of and if it is indispensable to polemics and focuses on the polemic debate during the French financial crisis of 2008. The debate had to do with the forms of salary bonus and stock options paid by the State to executives of the banks and big companies that claimed to be financially vulnerable. Throughout the analysis, the author points out that polemic debates do not necessarily bear discursive traces of emotion and passion. In rhetorical sense, the latter is understood as an attempt to provoke affections in the audience and as a feeling eagerly expressed by a speaker extremely implicated in a purpose. Nonetheless, as for the presence of passion in polemics, the author considers that two facts are undeniable: passion does not cause polemics but strengthens dichotomies, polarization, and disbelief in the Other; passion and reason seem to be two components that can only be understood if imbricated and that can never be dissociated. From this perspective, Amossy proposes that a rationality of passion and reasons for emotions be taken into consideration. In this sense, in relation to the Other, passion and reason are manifested in three different modalities of polemic discourse: accusation (strong emotions of indignation and wrath with the use of arguments that indirectly unveil the reasons for emotion), injunction (strong and less marked emotions with justifiable arguments), and instigation (subtle denouncements with rational arguments and superficial *pathos*).

In Chapter 6, entitled *Verbal Violence: Functions and Limits*, Amossy investigates the role of violence in polemics, pointing out that they are founded in conflict and not in verbal aggressiveness. Based on the analysis of digital conversations, specifically from the virtual forum of the newspaper *Libération*, about the bonus and stock options given to CEOs during the crisis, the author assures that verbal violence is neither sufficient nor necessary for polemics and works more as an accessory in rather than a definitive trace of public debates. Under this point of view, verbal violence can

be understood as a discursive register and not as an argumentative modality. Similar to *pathos*, it also amplifies dichotomization, polarization, and disbelief. Thus, the author demonstrates that verbal violence is not loose or out of control. On the contrary, it is ruled by some functions and limits, and acts differently depending on the genre of discourse (a TV debate, an open letter, a political discussion between friends).

In the book's Conclusion, entitled *Coexistence in Dissensus: The Functions of Public Polemics*, Amossy consolidates and expands the crucial points that were dealt with throughout the analyses, among which are the fact that public polemics can not be measured in terms of dialogue and the role of the media in developing polemics. The author summarizes that polemics operate relevant social and discursive functions by means of that which is not accepted in them: the verbal gesture of conflict through nonconsent. Although this assertion may seem paradoxical, the author reinforces that making apologia for polemics or defending the coexistence of dissensus is allowing the preservation of pluralism and diversity in the social sphere insofar as public polemics or the coexistence of divergent positions and interests fight for a cause, protest against intolerance, gather different identity groups that provoke slight or strong interactions between adversaries, and generate even the most profound disagreements. Thus, polemics in public debates are understood as an indispensable basis of democratic and contemporary life.

We should point out that the book *Apologie de la polémique* [*Apologia for Polemics*] comes at a very sensitive moment in French History, for it anticipates some important reflections prompted by the context of the terrorist act against the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January of 2015, during which the physical violence and the disloyal act of an “antagonist” pulverized the possibility of building a democratic space supported by divergences. Since the work by Amossy evokes an apologia for polemics, we should outline that the polemics studied by the author are indeed a war of plumes, a war of words,⁵ because, as Mesnard (1985)⁶ points out, only when divergences and

5 Confront Kerbrat-Orecchioni's text *La polémique et ses définitions* [*Polemic and its Definitions*]. In: KERBRAT-ORECCHIONI, C.; GELAS, N. (Orgs.). *Le discours polémique* [*The Polemic Discourse*]. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1980. pp.03-40.

6 In the author's opinion, “when passion increases, polemics, either offensive or defensive, imply risks, reaching armed confrontations or even slight physical attacks.” Text in Portuguese: “ofensiva ou defensiva, a polêmica implica riscos, quando a paixão aumenta, chegando ao confronto armado, ou até mesmo ao mínimo ataque físico.” In: COLLECTIF. *Cahiers V. L. Saulnier* 2. Traditions polémiques, n. 27, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 1985. pp.127-129. [École Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles Series].

verbal discussion become physical aggression can we realize the true risks of polemic activity. Amossy also admits that verbal violence, in its different forms, may symbolically fight against the Other, but she emphasizes that this can never be a trampoline to violent physical actions.

Since we live in a digital world that allows and generates several and intense different discursive positions, *Apologie de la polémique* [*Apologia for Polemics*] is a reference not only to scholars of language studies, argumentation and polemic discourse analysis but to everyone who defends the need to daily cultivate mutual respect, freedom of thought and expression, tolerance, and the pacific coexistence of differences.

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