Course Summary C.6-12: Elements of Rhetoric (1992-1993).

General

This course deals with classical thought and logic, with an emphasis on the historical roots in the ancient Greek heritage and Christianity. The document discusses various elements such as concepts, judgments, syllogisms and the use of models in human thinking. In addition, fundamental forms of reasoning such as deduction, reduction and induction are analyzed in depth through numerous philosophical and scientific examples. The text serves as a propaedeutic course to train students in strict logical reasoning and an understanding of Western cultural philosophy.

The course treats rhetoric not merely as a classical art of persuasion and linguistic proficiency, but as a profound social and cultural process of influence in which values, norms, ideals and expectations are instilled and conditioned between the individual, the group and society.

Based on a wide range of historical, psychological and anthropological case studies — from Marxist-Leninist brainwashing and Korean re-education camps to Western sensitivity training, Bhagwan encounter groups, Greek mythology, ethnoreligious magic in the Trobriand Islands, zombification in Haiti and biblical stories — the course analyses how group dynamics, emotional pressure, social criticism and power relations are used to shape or break down human beliefs, identity and behavior.

1: Introduction to Rhetoric, Culture and Group Dynamics

Rhetoric is essentially a discipline of linguistic skills aimed at establishing understanding and convincing a conversation partner or audience. This process of persuasion is never isolated, but is intrinsically intertwined with culture and the human sciences.

Culture is defined axiologically in the course as a system of values, ideals and behavioral norms that guide our actions and through which we evaluate ourselves and others. Rhetoric is the dynamic instrument through which these cultural values are communicated, transmitted and instilled. This rests on two fundamental pillars: group dynamics (the interaction and influence within a group of people) and institutional analysis or social criticism (the critical questioning and dismantling of established social structures and taboos).

2: Ideological Influence and Brainwashing

An extreme form of rhetorical influence can be found in Marxism-Leninism. In this system, the collective is central and individual opinions are subordinated to the party ideology. The re-education process works through a tightly organized ritual of group criticism and mandatory self-criticism (autocriticism).

When an individual deviates from the approved line, fellow group members accuse and isolate them. To be readmitted to the community, the individual must publicly humiliate themselves, confess their guilt and reaffirm the system's fundamental principles. This technique of 'brainwashing' was systematically applied to American prisoners of war during the Korean War. Without physical torture, but through organized group pressure, compulsory confession and the cultivation of mutual distrust through informants ('canaries'), traditional bonds of friendship and loyalty were broken down and prisoners' beliefs redirected.

3: Western 'Sensitivity Training' and Group Mechanisms

In the democratic West, various forms of values training also emerged, such as sensitivity training, encounter groups and 'human relations' programmes. In response to large-scale bureaucratic society, modern people often seek social refuge in small groups. Pioneers such as John Dewey and Kurt Lewin laid the foundations for the study of group dynamics and social influence.

Western training groups operate in an atmosphere of anti-tabooism, in which forms of politeness, social ranks and hierarchies are deliberately set aside. Under the mottoes of 'being oneself', 'unrestricted honesty' and 'deconditioning', participants are invited to reveal their deepest emotions and private lives. However, a subtle form of manipulation often emerges: through marathon sessions without sleep, emotional pressure and the fear of being excluded, participants abandon their own moral and religious frameworks. 'Social regard' — the fear of other people's judgment — proves to be a powerful lever for making individuals conform to the lowest common denominator of the group.

4: Eastern Enlightenment Groups and the 'Encounter'

A specific application of group rhetoric can be seen in Eastern enlightenment and encounter groups, such as those associated with Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. This movement combined Western depth psychology (Freud, Maslow, Janov) with Eastern mysticism. In intense encounter groups lasting several days, participants were encouraged to abandon all intellectual control

and rational resistance and to act out their repressed impulses — particularly anger, aggression and sexual energy — without restraint.

The idea behind this practice was that releasing repressed emotions would lead to purification and a spiritual 'rebirth'. However, the practice showed how thin the line can be between therapeutic liberation and psychological disintegration: intense group pressure, the dismantling of the conventional bourgeois ego and guided catharsis frequently led individuals to surrender their autonomy and conscience to the leader or the group.

5: Myths, Magic and the Ethnoreligious Group

The course goes beyond modern groups and examines how similar mechanisms of influence and expulsion operate in mythological and anthropological contexts.

The classical myth of Narcissus serves as an example of the analysis of fate and retribution (*atè*). Narcissus's transgression (*hubris*) — his contempt for others and boundless self-love — disrupts the social and religious order, prompting the goddess Nemesis to intervene and lead him to ruin and exclusion through an illusion.

In traditional, premodern communities, magic, totemism and ancestor worship fulfil a similar judicial role. Among the Trobriand Islanders, the magician acts as an enforcer of tribal laws and social balance, if necessary using physical means such as infection with hookworm. In Haiti, secret societies such as Bizango exercise a form of shadow justice through zombification. Through a paralyzing poison (tetrodotoxin) and the deeply rooted belief in the separation of the soul (*ti bon ange*), a deviant or antisocial member of the tribe is placed in a state resembling death and socially 'killed'. Zombification thus constitutes the ultimate sanction imposed by a close-knit community against an individual who violates fundamental cultural taboos.

6: Biblical Group Dynamics and Concluding Reflections

Finally, the course offers a rhetorical and sociological perspective on biblical passages. Jesus repeatedly appears as a figure who breaks through the prevailing religious taboos and narrow casuistry of his time — for example, when grain is picked on the Sabbath, when he protects the adulterous woman, or when he is anointed by a sinful woman. By shifting the emphasis from rigid rule-following to compassion and individual conscience, he challenges the social control exercised by religious leaders. This fundamental conflict

between Jesus's new system of values and established group dynamics ultimately leads to his betrayal and condemnation.

The concluding reflections emphasize that the study of rhetoric and culture always revolves around the interaction between the individual, the group and culture. In classical antiquity, this triad was described as the synthesis of ethics (the individual conscience) and politics (living together within the community). Rhetoric is the dynamic binding force that determines how human values are transmitted, defended, transformed or dismantled.