

Newsletter (#3 - 2018)

Dear members of the Rhetoric Society of Europe,

A brand new newsletter is here! In this edition, we are proud to present a long read, a book review written by Lisa Storm Villadsen on The Art of Gratitude (Engels, 2018).

As usual we also present you with new publications, calls and other relevant information.

As always, if you have any news that you'd like to share with the members, please just let us know!

Best wishes,

Magnus Hoem Iversen

on behalf of the Newsletter Team of the Rhetoric Society of Europe

Submit something for next newsletter

Longread: Jeremy David Engels' The Art of Gratitude (2018)

Book review written by Lisa Storm Villadsen, the University of Copenhagen.

"Harsh words from a young woman that Denmark has received well". This was how the leader of the Danish Social Democratic Party, Mette Frederiksen, responded to criticism on her Facebook page posted by Hanna Mohammed Hassan, a member of the far left-leaning party Enhedslisten, who criticized the Social Democratic Party's labor and immigration policies.

Frederiksen's comment set loose a heated debate about whether it was racist, but here I invoke it as an example of the kind of socio-political logic Jeremy Engels is out to debunk in his recent book The Art of Gratitude. Frederiksen's reaction seems to imply that she finds the criticism from Hassan (who came to Denmark as a refugee at the age of three) somehow out of line and inappropriate given that Hassan has found a new home in Denmark and thus owes that country gratitude for her personal safety, education, and civic opportunities.

Engels' central point is that western conceptions of gratitude are informed by principles of exchange that feed a sick culture of thankfulness as debt to the detriment of equality and social justice in our societies.

Understanding the rhetoric of gratitude

With this third book on emotion in a democratic setting (after Enemyship: Democracy and Counter-Revolution in the Early Republic (2010) and The Politics of Resentment: A Genealogy (2015)), Jeremy Engels stands as a key contributor to the current reorientation towards emotion in rhetorical studies.

The narrow focus on one single emotion, gratitude, allows Engels to provide a nuanced and multi-perspectival account that includes an historical overview of this emotion in civic and religious contexts, discussion of contemporary cultural and political manifestations, and philosophical and spiritual alternatives. While this may seem a very wide scope, the book reads with a clear focus, namely that dominant conceptions of gratitude have negative implications for people – personally as well as politically. Throughout the book, the reader never loses sight of Engels' overall purpose: to provide a critique of received western and Christian tradition on the meaning and function of gratitude and to lay the foundation for a reorientation toward a more constructive alternative. The alternative, gratefulness, is based in eastern philosophy, particularly yoga spirituality. This approach, the book explains, recommends itself by being oriented toward collectivity and interconnectedness, and, in Engels' words, "gratefulness provides us with a new foundation for democratic politics, the politics of collective agency, the politics of the common good, the politics of the sunset" (160).

Engels' overarching argument is that the feeling of gratitude historically has been co-opted, through the logic of debt, to become a tool for wielding power and control. Here is an example of Engels' disarmingly colloquial rendering of a complex ethical topic: "The debt of gratitude habituates us to seeing life through an economic lens of do ut des, tit for tat, one good turn deserves another, I'll be there for you because you're there for me, too. This rhetoric implores us to say "very much obliged, my friend," and "thank you, I owe you one." It encourages us to see society as a series of contracts. This means that nothing is above the market or above negotiation, as the common goods of citizenship must be." (143).

Engels argues that contemporary notions of gratitude affirm key aspects of neoliberalism, the dominant economic paradigm of the present, where a monetized conception of performance is valorized and allowed to dictate policy, often to the detriment of social, common goods, and argues that our culture is warped by a culture of a repressive exchange of benefits and ensuing indebtedness that leaves the weaker party not only beholden, but essentially controlled by those who are able to give more than they receive and do it to maintain power.

Through a Foucauldian-inspired reading of selected moments in western history Engels provides a genealogy of the feeling of gratitude as it has been conceptualized in antiquity (particularly by Cicero), and later through medieval Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy (represented by Hobbes), and ending with contemporary self-help and positive psychology books.

The appeal of this methodology, which with Foucault's words aims at "writing the history of the present", is that it highlights how contemporary phenomena – social norms and political logics, for example – came to be what they are. This attention to the created-ness of our society is then part of the rhetoricity of the project: by "revealing the present as a rhetorical construction" Engels hopes to "loosen the hold of conventional norms" and "create space for alternative futures" (10). His goal is "to narrate how gratitude became a political emotion designed to promote obedience through the adoption of economic language, especially the rhetoric of debt" (11).

From Aristotle to the Bhagavad Gita

In the opening chapter, "Words Matter: On the Rhetoric of Emotion", Engels draws on Aristotle and Heidegger's reading of him to make the point that emotion is pivotal to persuasion and that we cannot not see and relate to the world without our emotions as the 'interface'.

Such a rhetorical approach to the study of emotion, Engels suggest, points to the need for democratic citizenship to build on solid rhetorical training; in order to function responsibly in society citizens need to understand the power of rhetoric so that they can see through its manipulative manifestations and harness it for the common good.

The author then moves on to ancient roots of contemporary understandings of gratitude. In chapter 2 "From 'Charis' to 'Gratia': On the Political Origins of the Debt of Gratitude" he looks to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and contrasts this with Cicero's De Officiis and Seneca's De Beneficiis. Whereas Aristotle was deeply skeptical of gratitude for its tendency to make people feel indebted and thereby compromising their autonomy, Cicero saw its potential as a tool of social control through the rhetoric of debt; a line of thinking exacerbated by Seneca who saw gratitude as a perpetual debt that can never be repaid.

Throughout the Christian tradition, Engels argues in chapter 3 "Grattitudo": On Christian Gratitude and Existential Debt", gratitude was transcended into a matter of heaven and hell. 'Grattitudo', a word introduced by Medieval Scholastics, signified the debt we humans owe both in the world and to the higher powers, a debt that constantly reminds us of our obligations and unfreedom. In chapter 4 Engels turns to a very different kind of source for his genealogy, namely contemporary self-help books. In this immensely popular genre he finds that gratitude – presented as a positive and inward-looking coping strategy – in fact promotes what he calls "shocking political lessons" where indebtedness is seen as a marker of moral virtue, but also a disincentive to act toward change. The self-help literature thus makes gratitude a tool for attitude adjustment in the individual: it directs the reader to change his or her mental state to one of contentment with what they have. By focusing on positive thinking and appreciation it encourages complacency rather than action. Engels considers the social and political implications of this attitude and thus treats gratitude as a political emotion central to American politics.

True to the social constructivist impulse undergirding the project, Engels then moves to consider the possibilities of rhetorically changing the way gratitude is felt and made to function socially and politically. To this end, he turns to a mix of sources, including the poetry of Walt Whitman and eastern philosophy, particularly the ancient Hindu text on ethics, the Bhagavad Gita, and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, by some considered the foundational text of yoga philosophy. 'Santosha' is an ethical principle integral to the self-discipline required of a yogi. In chapter 5, Engels discusses how "the Yoga of Gratitude" provides an alternative to the ills of dominant gratitude conceptions. He proposes the word "gratefulness" to express the "emotional experience of overwhelming thankfulness for being alive" that ought to be what gratitude is about in stead of being about debt (16). Santosha orients us toward the present and the goods that surround us, and that, to Engels, is how it becomes socially and politically constructive, because it also orients us toward our being with others and the common good. Linking this spiritual awareness to societal matters, Engels invokes John Dewey who emphasized the importance of fostering ethical awareness and civic character in the individual for the sake of their participation in democracy. Similarly, Engels follows Martha Nussbaum in her exploration of the kind of political emotions that are central to a democratic society.

What is so wrong with gratitude?

Engels' critical analysis of received notions of gratitude and the positive connotations it traditionally carries is reason enough to read this book. Linking gratitude to the ancient Roman principle "Do ut des" ("Give so that you can be given to"), Engels persuasively makes the point that gratitude is a feeling that is considered very positive in western culture – historically, in Christianity, and in popular self-help literature. He then complicates this view by suggesting how thinking of gratitude as a feeling that acknowledges that being helped also means that one becomes indebted to the helper to some extent deprives the recipient of peace of mind. It is this logic of thinking of giving and receiving as 'a deal' comparable to borrowing money that troubles Engels. To think of gratitude in terms of debt, he writes, "encourages us to see life in economic terms, as a transaction" (3). Such an approach is prone to foster unhealthy social relations because it entails inequality in status and power. As Engels puts it, "The persistent danger of the debt of gratitude is that it will degrade social relationships to the point that we need someone to blame for our suffering. The debt of gratitude leaves us vulnerable to the easy answers provided by purveyors of the most violent forms of rhetoric in contemporary society, including enemyship and the politics of resentment." (143). Engels goes up against the utilitarian western tradition from Cicero up to Putnam to think of gratitude as a useful "social glue" (142) that works by way of reciprocity, and that, to Engels, is detrimental to individual and civic life.

Gratefulness as the alternative

With gratitude being such a negatively loaded concept, the author suggests 'gratefulness' as an alternative. Conceptualizing "the art of gratitude" as "the practice of gratefulness, not indebtedness" (136), Engels draws on inspiration from Meister Eckhart, Hindu tradition, and American poets like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman to argue that "gratefulness is the emotional experience of being moved by thanksgiving for life" (137, emphasis in the original). Gratefulness, Engels suggests, reorients our understanding of the good and encourages us to "reach out our hands to others, to embrace them for the support they offer us, not as a gift to be repaid, but as a contribution to the common project of life" (140). It is preferable because it promotes a feeling of interconnectedness based on shared, common goods. Writes Engels, "Democracy begins when citizens come together in communities to manage our shared existence because none of us can do it alone. Gratefulness represents the possibility for a revitalized democracy by revealing to us that we value life and by illuminating the common goods on which that life depends." (143-4).

To scholars of rhetoric, the primary interest in Engels' book is his reading of gratitude as a political emotion. His combination of Aristotle and Foucault makes for a persuasive point that gratitude and gratefulness are rhetorically significant emotions because they are shared normative frames of understanding relations and obligations between people. Depending on whether one buys into dominant notions of gratitude or lives by the principles of gratefulness will deeply affect how one perceives the world and one's place in it. But Engels takes it further: adding to the (among rhetoricians) widely acknowledged arguments regarding the legitimate centrality of emotion to rhetorical and political practice, he adds yoga, claiming that it "is more rhetorical than practitioners realize" (138). Engels points to what he calls a "more instrumental" form of yoga meditation, which is a disciplined, consensious practice of focusing on a particular object completely. It is both contemplative and directive because it concerns bringing mental and emotional distractions under conscious control. If I understand Engels correctly, what he finds rhetorical in meditation is in part a heuristic impulse: by learning how our minds work, we can better focus on the things that make us feel grateful. But rather than thinking of them as putting us in a position of debt, the yoga principle of santosha helps cultivate a more existential gratefulness that, according to Engels, allows one to return to the things for which one is grateful "with a new appreciation for life and a new understanding of the common good" (139).

A timely and provocative discussion

The Art of Gratitude is a timely contribution to the age-old question of the role of emotion in rhetoric and politics and offers a strong statement on the centrality of emotion to cognition and persuasion. In addition to the theoretical and methodological originality of the study, the book also holds interest to rhetorical critics as I tried to suggest with the opening anecdote; Engels' critical reading of the self-help literature and its neo-liberalist logic in particular is apt to inspire further critical inquiry into the social sanctioning of and by emotions in societal and political contexts. In the short term, the book thus recommends itself the most to rhetorical critics interested in analyzing the influence of neoliberalism on discursive logics in politics and elsewhere in the public sphere. But over time, as contemporary theoretical literature on the role of emotion grows, this book may enter a canon of emotion-specific studies to serve as reference points for future research.

Written, as it is, for a wider audience the book may strike some rhetoric scholars as a bit redundant in its explanations of rhetoric, and also more generally; key thoughts are presented in numerous variations. The reverse version of this is that the book is uniquely accessible in spite of its abstract topic and, to some, probably provocative suggestion of turning to yoga for democratic citizen education.

It is characteristic of Engels' writing that he meets the reader half-way; even though his topic is abstract and the argument rests on complicated philosophical and spiritual ideas, there is no grandstanding or theoretical posing; he addresses his reader in a clear and accessible, at times almost colloquial tone and takes his time addressing possible reservations and counterarguments arising in the reader's mind. This open and straightforward manner is not just commendable in general, but particularly becoming to a book that ends in a spiritually based invitation to the reader to assume a different outlook on the world and our place in it.

Is spirituality the answer to current political ills?

Assuming that Engels' analysis of the current American political ethos is correct, European readers of his book might consider to what extent a similar view of gratitude and its political implications apply to European settings. As a European who enjoys yoga (albeit an almost spirituality-free version) and what it does to body and mind and who lives in a social welfare state, I recognize much in Engels' critical readings of dominant conceptions of gratitude, yet I remain unsure why we need spirituality for the feeling of and commitment to connectedness Engels is looking for. I think he is correct in highlighting the importance of new approaches to collective emotional and ethical orientations in meeting the ills of contemporary political culture. However, ideologies of equality and solidarity do not have to be spiritually based. Engels' project of theorizing a democratic politics that will result in better forms of civic engagement is an important one, and a spiritually based reorientation may be one answer. However, I doubt that it holds the potential "to counteract powerful political emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment that dominate our political landscape" that Engels envisions (9). Civic education and rhetorical citizenship, I would argue, need to be secular and dislodged from religion or spirituality to have more universal appeal.

Recent publications

NB: All members, remember to send us a word when you publish new work, as we would love to feature it in our newsletter.

- Giuseppe Ballacci: [Political Theory Between Philosophy and Rhetoric: Politics as Transcending Rhetoric and Control](#)
- Chris Miles: [Marketing, Rhetoric and Control: The Magical Foundations of Marketing Theory](#)
- Maureen Daly Goggin & Peter Goggin (eds.): [Serendipity in Rhetoric, Writing and Literacy Research](#).

Members announcements & other news

Call for papers for Anthology: "Rhetorics of Vegetarianism". [Click here for details](#). Deadline: 30 September, 2018. NB: DEADLINE IMMINEENT.

Call for papers for the European Conference on Argumentation - ECA 2019, Groningen, The Netherlands: 24-27 June, 2019. [Click here for details](#). Deadline 1 October, 2018 - NB DEADLINE APPROACHING

Call for contributions for Media Ethics Magazine: "Forum on #MeToo and Media Ethics". [Click here for details](#). Deadline: 15 October, 2018.

Call for papers for special issues of Res Rhetorica: "Rhetoric of Popular Culture". [Click here for details](#). Deadline: 31 October, 2018.

Call for papers for special issue of Rhetoric of Health and Medicine: "Interrogating the Past and Shaping the Future of Mental Health Rhetoric Research". [Click here for details](#). Deadline: December 10, 2018.

Call for papers for special issues of Res Rhetorica: "Rhetoric of Leadership". [Click here for details](#). Deadline: 31 December, 2018.

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