

# Old Delivery and Modern Demagogy

## How Ancient Oratorical Style and Delivery can Help us to Understand Modern Populist Speakers

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Article abstract

My paper aims to find potential elements of comparison between ancient oratoria popularis and modern populist oratory. I will consider case studies drawn from Gracchan speech style and from the oratory of Donald Trump.

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# Old Delivery and Modern Demagogy; How Ancient Oratorical Style and Delivery can Help us to Understand Modern Populist Speakers

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**Abstract:** My paper aims to find potential elements of comparison between ancient *oratoria popularis* and modern populist oratory. I will consider case studies drawn from Gracchan speech style and from the oratory of Donald Trump.

**Résumé:** Mon article vise à trouver des éléments de comparaison possibles entre l'ancien *oratoria popularis* et l'oratoire populiste moderne, en présentant également quelques études de cas tirés du style de discours de Gracchan et de l'oratoire de Donald Trump.

**Keywords:** Gracchi, oratory, *populares*, populism, rhetoric, Trump

## 1. A very short premise

The claim that the art of speaking today is still dependent on standards established by ancient rhetoric is supported by many sources. As Kennedy (1999) says, “In the twentieth century classical rhetoricians continue to be studied for their contributions to a theory of discourse and as the basis of analysis of classical, medieval, Renaissance, and modern texts composed by writers who had studied classical rhetoric and were addressing audiences familiar with its conventions” (p. 424). As a logical, not chronological, consequence, Corbett (1998) writes: “The author believes that the elaborate system of the ancients, which taught the student how to find something to say, how to select and organize his material and how to phrase it in the best possible way, is still useful and effec-

tive, perhaps more useful and effective than the various courses of study that replaced it" (p. vii).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the *actio* or *pronuntiatio*, translated as "delivery" in English, is the least studied among the five parts of oratorical activity (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, actio*).<sup>2</sup> Delivery concerns itself with how a speech is presented and pays attention to the tone voice, the position of the body, and to gestures. Regrettably, Greek and Roman ancient sources deal less with the *actio* than with style (*elocutio*), which is the tool that helps to structure the speech and finalize its written form—the only document that we can study.

Unfortunately, we do not possess Greek and Latin theoretical treatises on delivery, even though we know that they existed; there was a *Perì hypokríseos* written by Theophrastus of Eresus, who was a disciple of Aristotle, and some Latin treatises, quoted by *Rhet. Her.* 3.11.19.:

*Quare, <et> quia nemo de ea re diligenter scripsit - nam omnes vix posse putarunt de voce et vultu et gestu dilucide scribi, cum eae res ad sensus nostros pertinerent - et quia magnopere <ea pars> a nobis ad dicendum comparanda est, non neglegenter videtur tota res consideranda.* Therefore, because no one has written carefully on this subject — all have thought it scarcely possible for voice, mien, and gesture to be lucidly described, as appertaining to our sense-experience — and because the mastery of delivery is a very important requisite for speaking, the whole subject, as I believe, deserves serious consideration (transl. Caplan 1964)

And Quint. 11.3.143:

*Togam veteres ad calceos usque demittebant, ut Graeci pallium: idque ut fiat, qui de gestu scripserunt circa tempora illa, Plotius Nigidiusque, praecipiunt.* "The ancients used to let the toga fall to the heels, as the Greeks are in the habit of doing with the cloak: Plotius and Nigidius both recommend this in the books which they wrote about gesture as practised in their own day (transl. Butler 1922).

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<sup>1</sup> I limit myself to referring to some very important introductory studies such as those conducted by Kennedy (1994); Lausberg (1998); Aldrete (1999); Kennedy (1999).

<sup>2</sup> For a general introduction to the topic in ancient writers see Hall (2007) and Cavarzere (2011).

Therefore, the main sources concerning oratorical delivery in antiquity are Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3; the *Rhetoric to Herennius* 3, 11-27; Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.213-228; Cicero, *Orator*; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 11, 3. Some treatises included in Halm's collection of *Rhetores Latini Minores* could be included as well.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, scholarship has to address an evident problem of the quality of sources. We cannot compare the texts of ancient speeches with their public delivery, and we must limit ourselves to analyzing descriptions provided by rhetorical or grammatical works. Or, as an alternative, we must be satisfied with the stylistic analysis of ancient texts. From the use of rhetorical strategies, we can deduce something about the different strategies of delivery according to the variable contexts in which speeches are held, whether they are judicial courts, the Senate, or public assemblies (*conditiones*).<sup>4</sup> To sum up, we would like to know something more about ancient delivery, which is still obscure and needs further enquiry, but we have to approach it by examining the traces that the stylistic analysis can offer us.

In this paper, I want to focus my attention on a little studied aspect of the reception of ancient eloquence, the style of demagogues, which Roman politicians and orators called *oratoria popularis* because its supporters were considered to be defenders of the people. This paper offers only a brief introduction to a wider field of research and aims to show that some of the characteristics attributed to *oratores populares* (demagogues) in ancient Latin sources can also be found in modern populist orators, or at least in the style or in the delivery of some of them. After dealing with ancient pieces of information on the *oratoria popularis*, I will look at some features of the contemporary populist style of speaking, in order to compare its features with ancient examples.

## 2. Two examples: the Gracchi and Clodius

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<sup>3</sup> For a general bibliography on the *pronuntiatio* see Nocchi (2013) and Balbo (2018). All these texts share specific traits including: a. the limited scope of the sections about oratory methods; b. more attention paid to voice and gestures than to face; c. the distinction between the speaker's and the actor's use of gestures and voice; d. the aim to always preserve balance and mediation.

<sup>4</sup> See Mouritsen (2001) and Morstein Marx (2004).

The *oratoria popularis* as a rhetorical and communicative phenomenon has yet to be fully studied. After important studies in the 1980s-90s, starting with the seminal paper from David (1980), both classicists and historians have paid new attention to this issue, as some contributions show.<sup>5</sup> Researchers in political and communication sciences seem also to have become interested in this kind of ancient oratory, with the aim of identifying possible comparative approaches between ancient and modern populist speaking.<sup>6</sup> If we stick to the ancient Roman context, it seems possible to identify a speaking style that is characterized by some common elements even if it does not characterize each *orator popularis*. We can describe it by resorting to four Latin adjectives: *acerbus*, *asper*, *acer*, *vehemens* (“bitter, severe, sharp, forceful” according to the Oxford Latin Dictionary). These words build up a style marked by vehemence and expressive violence, which is in turn caused by the high tone of the voice. The *oratores populares* share the tendency to flatter people and oppose the Senate in a strong way, using pathetic elements to persuade listeners and to contrast opponents' proposals. Opponents respond with dryness and obstinacy, but, at the same time, show a great ability to vary the tones and also to use sweetness and moderation in their speeches. They like portraying themselves in symbolic and charismatic form even if they run the risk of being violently attacked and demonized. Their political conduct aims to polarize the opposition between friends and enemies in addition to political opponents. As David (1980, p. 181) puts it, “L’*eloquentia popularis* n’est pas une

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to the above quoted works by Morstein Marx and Mouritsen, there is also Steel (2006), Kaplow (2012) and Steel and Blom (2013). I am currently supervising, together with Professor B. Pieri, a doctoral dissertation in the university of Bologna, whose author, Mr. E. Mattioni, collects and studies the Republican *oratoria popularis* during the last years of the Republic. I will use some of his materials in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Apart from the papers quoted in the last paragraph of this paper (Higgins, De Voogd and so on), we can highlight the round table, entitled “Populism and the Rise of Empires,” held on June 13, 2018 at the Swiss Institute of Rome. On this occasion, C. Hirschi, Professor of History in St. Gallen, tried to locate the “birthplace” of modern populism in the political processes of Late Roman Republic and above all of Gracchan times through reference to historical general phenomena alone, without any references to textual elements.

qualité, mais un comportement que l'on choisit d'adopter pour se donner ainsi, au moins, l'apparence d'une prise en charge de les aspirations populaires.”

A complete list of these speakers does not yet exist, but there is common agreement about the inclusion of the following orators:<sup>7</sup>

Name	Period	References
P. Licinius Crassus Dives Mucianus	<i>Consul</i> 131 BCE	ORF <sup>8</sup> 31
Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 133 BCE	ORF 34
P. Decius	<i>Praetor</i> 115 BCE	ORF 36
M. Fulvius Flaccus	<i>Consul</i> 125 BCE	ORF 40
Caius Sempronius Gracchus	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 123 BCE	ORF 48
C. Servilius Glaucia.	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 101 BCE	ORF 58 b
L. Ap(p)uleius Saturninus	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 100 BCE	RE <sup>9</sup> I/2 n. 29, 262- 269
C. Memmius	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 111 BCE	ORF 60
Cn. Domitius Ahe- nobarbus	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 104 BCE	ORF 69
P. Sulpicius Rufus	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 88 BCE	ORF 76
Q. Sertorius	<i>Quaestor</i> 90 BCE	ORF 81
Q. Varius Hybrida	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 90 BCE	ORF 88
M. Aemilius Lepi- dus.	<i>Consul</i> 78 BCE	ORF 95
Cn. (?) Sicinius	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 76	ORF 98

<sup>7</sup> I use some initial results of E. Mattioni's research also based upon David's list (1980).

<sup>8</sup> ORF refers to *Oratorum Romanorum Fragmenta liberae Rei Publicae quartis curis edidit* Henrica Malcovati, Augustae Taurinorum 1976. The editor lists ancient sources about life and oratorical activity.

<sup>9</sup> RE is the *Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft* edited by A. Pauly and G. Wissowa from 1893 to 1978.

	BCE	
C. Licinius Macer	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 73 BCE	ORF 110
L. Sergius Catilina	<i>Praetor</i> 68 BCE	ORF 112
M. Lollius Palicanus	<i>Praetor</i> 68 BCE	ORF 117
C. Porcius Cato	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 56 BCE	ORF 136
P. Clodius Pulcher	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 58 BCE	ORF 137
C. Scribonius Curio	<i>Tribunus plebis</i> 50 BCE	ORF 170

None of the above quoted speakers left entire speeches, so we can only analyze fragmentary texts, normally very poor, from which information can be obtained only through complex work of stylistic examination. I do not aim to develop a thorough enquiry of all available passages here but only to highlight the persistence of some of their characteristics.

Among the *oratores populares*, a central role is played by Tiberius and Caius Gracchus, two tribunes of the people who, at the end of the second century BC, sought to promote a better division of the public territories conquered after the wars in the Mediterranean. Both were killed by the aristocrats. We can consider the following example:

C. Gracchus, *Speech for the Acceptance of the Papiria Law on the Re-election of the tribunes* (131 BC):

*pessimi Tiberium fratrem meum optimum interfecerunt. Em! Videte quam par pari sim* (ORF 17 = Charis. *Ars Gramm.* 313.18-20)

The scoundrels have murdered my excellent brother Tiberius. Well then! See how I am equal to my peer! (transl. *Project Fragments of Roman Republican Orators*, <http://www.firro.gla.ac.uk/>)

C. Gracchus spoke in support of C. Papirius Carbo's proposal to extend secret vote to legislative assemblies. On the same occasion, he attacked the enemies of his faction who were responsible for killing his brother Tiberius in 133. The orator creates a polarization between bad and good men (*pessimi - optimus*): the bad ones have killed the good one (his brother). But Caius also adds that he

is like his brother and so they should also kill him. It is clear that he wants to identify himself with his brother and to accept entirely the burden of his political ideas and their consequences. His delivery should have been highly pathetic as one can see from the use of the interjection and the imperative, the stakes of polyptote (*par pari*), and the apostrophe to the community (*videte*). Unfortunately, we can only make a few hypotheses about the use of voice, gestures and facial expressions, but, as Quintilian 11.3 broadly shows, the act of public speaking, frequently in Latin, shows the usage of gestures in the context of tension.

We have mentioned that it is impossible to read a whole speech from any of these orators but there is no lack of attempts to reconstruct some of them in classical philology. I would like to refer to Corbeill's reconstruction of Clodius' *contio* in 56 BCE, a real masterpiece that was proposed to a surprised and attentive audience during the conference on Roman Republican fragmentary oratory, which was held in Turin from April 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015.<sup>10</sup> Anthony Corbeill relies on Ciceronian passages that pass down significant pieces of Clodius' possible *argumentatio* and, in an extraordinary form, arrives at a very convincing performance that could well interpret Clodian oratory. I quote here only a short passage that fits our enquiry well:

On that most happy day in the March of my tribunate, during the consulship of the most glorious consuls Lucius Calpurnius Piso and Aulus Gabinius, by your most resounding vote, Quirites, you yourselves drove this man from the site of the most foul murders in the history of our Republic. And now, without consulting your authority, not only have this man's henchmen used illegal legislation to restore this man to a city that is not his but they have returned him to live in a house that had since been duly and properly consecrated to the gods. *o di immortales!* Who can be so blind not to see this? And yet I have no doubt that when Cicero appears in the Senate tomorrow we will yet again see on display his old witty self. Rather than treating his own illegalities, he will surely turn his attention to the seventh section of the response, where the haruspices mention "hoary sacrificial rites"—SACRIFICIA VETVSTA—that have been performed with insufficient care.

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<sup>10</sup> See Corbeill (2018), *passim*.



Although it hardly applies, I have no doubt that he will return to those fictive events from over five years ago, when I was entirely acquitted of involvement in inappropriate ceremonies by a jury of loyal Romans; indeed, the only testimony against me was from slaves, non-citizens, women, and Cicero himself—a fitting group. (Corbeill 2018, pp. 179-80)

Corbeill's reconstruction is very persuasive and is likely to reproduce the tones of the original.<sup>11</sup> He builds Clodius' speech using the ancient sources about his style and confirms the main features of the *oratoria popularis*: expressive violence, screams, exaggeration that makes frequent use of figures such as hyperbolas, anaphors and epiphors, and antitheses. The tension reaches the highest level, with a strong involvement from supporters and friends, as well as the use of sarcasm, which provides some examples of this unbalanced and vehement talk. Although, naturally, this cannot constitute a supporting test (because this was Corbeill' not Clodius' delivery), the author of the paper declaimed his speech extremely effectively, accompanying it with frequent variations of tone of voice, vehement gestures of the hands, and frequent shifts of the body. This behavior could well simulate those that ancient sources considered plausible for the Roman speaker.

These very limited examples inform us about the existence of another form of speech, very far from the examples of entire speeches of Cicero, for instance, that were profoundly revised before their publication and lost a lot of their excessive hardness. But we need to understand whether this style died with ancient Rome or is still alive today.

### 3. From ancients to moderns, from the *populares* to populism

If the *oratoria popularis* is a behavior, almost a way of speaking and activating people's instincts, then one can legitimately establish a comparison between this old way of speaking and the means used in today's political communication. First and foremost, we should ask if we can compare the ancient *popularis* world to the modern populist phenomenon represented, *exempli gratia*, by

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<sup>11</sup> During the conference, he also offered a very effective performance from the point of view of delivery.

characters like Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, or Beppe Grillo and Matteo Salvini in Italy.<sup>12</sup>

First of all, we have to underline an aspect of a “sociological” nature: the *oratores populares* do not belong to the common people but are almost always aristocrats who use the people to achieve their political goals. Secondly, the *oratoria popularis* is not the expression of a definite ideology. *Oratores populares* sustain the “people” but, in ancient Rome, “people” is a very complex and polysemic concept and has neither a self-consciousness nor a precise list of characteristics. On the contrary, even if scholars do not agree on a synthetic definition of the word and of its political content,<sup>13</sup> we often speak of populism (or neopopulism) in terms of an ideology of political movements or politicians who oppose the political, capitalist, or financial elite. They accuse politicians and capitalists of betraying the people’s real interests in order to preserve their power, and they accuse it of destroying its identity through the influx of immigrants, which has the result of a growth of xenophobic tendencies. We leave aside the so-called “Agricultural Populism, that started in Russia in the hands of a group of nardonik intellectuals or populist, for the purpose of recovering rural ideals as opposed to those of the Russian autocracy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Poblete 2011, pp. 201-202), as well as the “Latin American Populism” where the leaders opposed to the landowners and fought against the North American imperialism. I think that we could agree with Poblete (2015) who observes that “there are several disputes on what populism is, but currently there is probably greater controversy over how to measure it” (p. 201).

In populist ideology, we always stress the distance between people and politicians, with the latter being characterized by a condition of privilege and a different language. The “new” leaders of populist movements recall their “popular” origin and emphasize

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<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, the list is very short and cannot be exhaustive and therefore cannot highlight the great differences that exist among them.

<sup>13</sup> As it is possible to imagine, the bibliography is enormous: see for instance—and without any claim to completeness—Canovan (1981) and (2004); Taggart (2000); Stanley (2008); Inglehart and Norris (2016); Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017).

their ability to speak for the people's good, although their financial wealth is often very high.

By now it is also clear, thanks to some recent studies, that this populist ideology, which is multifaceted and declined differently in every country, expresses itself with an oratorical style that has some peculiarities; it possesses a sort of "latent framework" in the context of the political modern discourse (See Poblete 2015, pp. 203-205). Canovan (2004) described it as "colourful and undiplomatic language" (p. 242). Sometimes populist leaders intentionally avoid appearing too educated and aim instead to identify themselves with the common people, with the clear goal of separating themselves from the *élite*.

It is well-known that the current president of the United States belongs to a political typology marked by populist sentiments. But what can be said of his eloquence? Take, for example, the oratory of Donald Trump. As Montgomery (2017) points out, "Trump has managed to fashion a manner of speaking that ventriloquises a directness of speech - replete with pithy resonances and sometimes humorous overstatements – which catches the vernacular rhythms of those who have little left to lose" (p. 19).<sup>14</sup> Let us look at the following case:

To put it simply, we meet at a time of **both immense promise and great peril**. It is entirely **up to us** whether we lift the world **to new heights or let it fall into a valley of disrepair**. We have it in **our power**, should we so choose, **to lift millions from poverty, to help our citizens realize their dreams, and to ensure that new generations of children are raised free from violence, hatred, and fear**.

No one has shown more contempt for other nations and for the well-being of their own people than **the depraved regime** in North Korea. It is responsible for the starvation deaths of millions of North Koreans. [...] The Iranian government masks **a corrupt dictatorship** behind the false guise of a democracy. It has turned a wealthy country, with a rich history and culture, into an economi-

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<sup>14</sup> See also Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow (2018) with further bibliography. For a general introduction see Mudde (2004); Charteris Black (2014); Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015); Crespy (2015); Aslanidis (2018).

cally depleted rogue state whose chief exports are violence, bloodshed, and chaos. (Trump, 2017 [bold added])

The language is highly hyperbolic, rich in antitheses, and, through the frequency of first-person, plural pronouns (*us...we*) and through the reference to “new generations,” it aims to evoke the idea of a community that is not different from its president. Trump makes use of groups of words that progressively grow in length (growing syntagms), which is a classic tool used by Cicero and described by Quintilian:

**to lift millions from poverty,  
to help our citizens realize their dreams  
to ensure that new generations of children are raised free  
from violence, hatred, and fear**

The stylistic elements of this speech include the parallelism of the initial part (here defined by the infinitives) and the progressive increase in the number of words in the second part of the clause. The effect is highly emphatic. This is not, however, a specific feature of populist speeches, although it is a common feature of many speeches of the last century, as we find it widely employed in many important speeches, like, for example, Martin Luther King’s Lincoln Memorial discourse. Trump’s speech at the UN, by contrast, seems closer to a populist style given the direct attack against the enemy, in this case the North Korean government. The criticism is based on ethical elements and on a moral evaluation as we can see from the use of the word “depraved.” These tools are quite simple and, as Montgomery has observed, close to the feelings of ordinary people; populist oratory appeals to instruments that are not refined but easily persuasive.

The examination of Trump’s delivery was made possible by social media like YouTube ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-Hk\\_po6KGI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-Hk_po6KGI)). If we listen to the president’s speech, we observe that his expression is clear, his tone is tense but capable of emphasizing the key terms with appropriate slowdowns. He effectively isolates the most important words and turns his gaze to the whole hemicycle by rotating around a vertical axis and giving the impression of speaking to all those who are listening to him and not just to some interlocutors. He also succeeds in arousing laughter

and winning over the audience. Also, the colors of his outfit are carefully selected; the blue jacket, white shirt, and red tie reproduce the colors of the US flag. His tone becomes hostile and louder when he refers to his enemies (from Korea to criminal gangs).

Although it is impossible to draw relevant conclusions from such a small dossier, these examples of ancient and modern discourses all seem to have common features. They are public discourses (proposal of the laws for C. Gracchus; public assembly discourse for Clodius; information and definition of the international political goals for Trump), and the speakers each address an informed assembly that expects a rhetorical treatment of the subject and not only communication. The tones seem similar: treble hardened by personal experience and by the *exempla* (the pure brother Gracchus, the reference to the criminal gangs and to North Korea).

The effective *actio* of Trump, which directs a nod to the listeners and tries to convey the sense that the speaker relates to their problems and dramas can also be identified, I believe, in the fragments of the Gracchi and Clodius.

Clearly, I cannot hope to present a complete record of the elements of similarity and difference between these speakers. It would also be naïve to claim to find a direct influence of the old oratory on Trump, especially since in his readings, we find no references that suggest he has knowledge of ancient texts, as we can see from the list on Quartz (<https://qz.com/852495/the-art-of-the-deal-all-the-books-donald-trump-has-publicly-said-hes-read-and-liked/>).

#### **4. Conclusion: ancient models for US presidents?**

Many studies have looked for links between the oratory art of the presidents of the United States and that of ancient speakers. The first example is Barack Obama, who was often compared to Cicero. Philippe Rousselot ([www.tulliana.eu](http://www.tulliana.eu), March 2009) spoke of a "living case of a phenomenon of reception"; other references were made by, for example, Higgins (2008) and de Voogd (2009). Let us read, for instance, de Voogd's advice:

Obama's rhetorical arsenal - further served by decisive qualities (elegance, voice, gestures) at the mouth of the speaker - is impressive. We find, more or less, the same characteristics in all these great speeches, since the Democratic convention of 2004, which launched its national career, until its Victory speech of November 4, while passing by the anthology advocacy for the Interfaith reconciliation in Philadelphia last March and the Berlin speech on US-Europe relations in August ... And even the investiture speech of January 20, as we will see, fits perfectly into this 'Obamian style', whose wealth makes the 44th President of the United States a 'new Cicero' (Charlotte Higgins of the Guardian.). The abundance of figures used in this piece is a first sign of this richness: alliterations, anaphors (initial repetitions from one sentence to another), antitheses, ternary rhythms, questions and oratorical precautions, concessions, dialogism (exchange imagined with absent interlocutors), as well as the search for metonymies, a detail that strikes the imagination far more than the generic concept or the abstract idea: to speak of ecology, for example, no figures or scholarly considerations on global warming but a concrete evocation: "As we speak, cars in Boston and factories in Beijing are melting the icecap in the Arctic, reducing the coastline on the Atlantic, and bringing drought on farms, from Kansas to Kenya" (de Voogd, 2009).

This portrait is very interesting and comprehensive, but if Obama is compared to Cicero, with whom can one think of comparing Trump? Many suggestions for good potential candidates can be found in the press. The following is a short list:

Crassus (R. Douthat

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/opinion/the-trumpiest-roman-of-them-all.html>)

Caesar (P. Freeman,

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/donald-trump-and-the-fall-of-the-american-republic\\_us\\_5823a43de4b0aac624890ded](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/donald-trump-and-the-fall-of-the-american-republic_us_5823a43de4b0aac624890ded))

Clodius (still P. Freeman,

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/philip-freeman/trump-rome-populist\\_b\\_9659660.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/philip-freeman/trump-rome-populist_b_9659660.html))

The Gracchan Brothers (F. Alberoni,

<http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/trump-viene-dritto->

[dallantica-roma-1349006.html](http://dallantica-roma-1349006.html); I. Adizes, <http://www.ichakadizes.com/donald-trump-the-gracchi-brothers-and-the-fall-of-the-roman-republic/>)  
Cicero (J. Zauzner et Ch. Van den Berg) [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/book-party/wp/2016/11/03/donald-trump-the-cicero-of-2016/?utm\\_term=.c5cc50b27a0b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/book-party/wp/2016/11/03/donald-trump-the-cicero-of-2016/?utm_term=.c5cc50b27a0b))

Undoubtedly, US journalists and scholars build an interesting series of reception cases, where antiquity is called in action to understand contemporaneity, even beyond the boundaries of a rational system of comparison. The real historical elements, which make clear the role and the activity of ancient Romans, remain in the background while rhetorical elements of style and delivery are used to create an opposition that a close reading of the sources does not allow for. Moderation, balance, the ability to dominate speech based on coherence, and careful organization of the parts of the speech play a virtual game against vehemence, personal attack, and charisma. In a sort of intellectual game of a rhetorical nature, the ancient oratory offers a tool to understand better modern speeches but loses many of its real characteristics.

The variety of opinions has two consequences:

- a. it is difficult—and not useful—to be too schematic and distinct, simplifying phenomena such as the eloquence of Rome, which is incredibly multifaceted. In fact, one can find traits of pride and violence in Cicero and moderation in the Gracchi, as is also the case for Obama and Trump;
- b. many interpreters tend to construct few meaningful parallels using scientific methods and rely instead on activating the reader's cultural memory. Moreover, in their papers, they tend to trivialize phenomena that are sometimes much more multifaceted.

We have to take into consideration the enormous differences given in the delivery by the mass media, which allow an asynchronous diffusion of the discourse and, through the unity of images and soundtracks, give to the words and to the gesture an incredible communicative effectiveness that was unthinkable in antiquity.

Nonetheless, at the end of this short, introductory survey, I believe that a more precise study of the oratory techniques of ancient eloquence can offer an excellent key to interpreting contemporary political communication. This study should be carried out because, above all, the forms of contemporary demagogic speech can help historians of Latin literature and rhetoric, like myself, to better understand ancient phenomena.

As the late Augusto Rostagni, professor of Latin and classical philology in Turin, once said, “Niente giova di più alla comprensione dell’antico come l’esperienza delle cose modern” (Nothing is more useful for the comprehension of antiquity than the experience of modernity); so also the rhetorical categories of antiquity can be useful for understanding modern political discourse.

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