

Epistolary Politics Today: Von der Leyen's Storytelling in Three Tongues

Nobody reads books anymore. Nobody writes texts anymore. Nobody wants long stories, get to the point! We can hear these claims almost every day. This short reflection seeks to remind you of the simple fact that these claims are b*shit. My argument is that we live in a time when writing and storytelling are of such importance that European politics are made on the basis of stories – in oral and written format, and in multiple languages.

As many of you know, as a literary scholar and now professional “company poet,” my business and life passion is writing. And I am writing these lines about an hour after Ursula von der Leyen gave her speech in Strasbourg. She wants to become the president of the European Commission. At this hour, we do not know if she will succeed or not. Given the troublesome circumstances that led to her nomination, the outcome of the election tonight is quite uncertain. But it is not my intention to speculate about her power to ultimately convince the members of the Parliament. My aim is simply to point to some narrative hard facts that have accompanied her “application” today and in the previous days. These aspects are what I would call: epistolary politics, cultural multi-lingualism, and personal storytelling. Let me briefly explain what I mean.

Yesterday, I heard in a news report that members of the opposition party circulated a letter or “dossier” entitled „Why Ursula von der Leyen is an inadequate and inappropriate candidate.” I almost freaked out when I heard this. I am not going into the details of the letter but what made me angry is the simple fact that something that would count as mobbing in most other work environments nowadays is accepted nonchalantly by the top-level political executives of our age (I am not picking up the

question of whether or not this would have happened with a male candidate). After all, is this what we should teach our students that, if you oppose someone in a democracy, you should put together a pamphlet that denigrates the person *and* his/her role?

This very finding, however, led me to an even more striking revelation. If people who obviously are used to having and playing with power, decide to use a letter to spread their message, what does this say about writing? What does it say about modern media usage? For sure, letters today get circulated via multiple channels, mostly online. But they did not tweet or Facebook their message – they wrote a letter! Yet, they were not the only ones using this century-old technique to convert thoughts into actions. Von der Leyen herself wrote letters in the past days and weeks in which she addressed different political parties and “pitched” her political messages. So, to wrap up this first point: This entire episode has been a powerful demonstration of what I would call epistolary politics (letter-based). The letters became the content of mediated messages.

Writing letters to different political audiences also brings me to the second aspect of politics based on written and oral narratives – namely: language. Before turning on the television this morning shortly before 9:00 a.m., I had wondered in which language von der Leyen would give her speech. My bet was: French. But obviously, this would not be strategic because strategy means you have to get as many people as possible on board and the Parliament does not consist mostly of native French speakers. Still, the reason why I became excited about this issue is because of the fact that von der Leyen’s ability to speak English and French fluently became such a big issue in the previous press coverage. And, like it or not, in Germany, more than in other European countries, fluency in English, not even talking about French, is NOT self-evident!

Von der Leyen then took the middle path which I, as someone who is really into intercultural-anything, really liked: She started with French, then switched to German, and then spent most time talking in English. Again, I am sure there will be “experts” (Germans love experts) analyzing the exact time she spent talking in one or the other language. My point is much more general. Von der Leyen throughout the past weeks, probably throughout her life, has been aware of the power of speaking different languages when addressing different people. Now, I am running the risk of becoming too sophisticated here in the sense of “language shapes thinking” in a far-reaching philosophical sense. What I am simply trying to say is that language matters to reach, touch, and finally convince people.

Language here is closely related to culture in a much broader sense. Von der Leyen today did not really change the melody of her voice when switching languages, as would be natural. However, one can assume that, as soon as she did switch, the attention of whoever was being addressed was raised. After all, all members of the Parliament also have a “mother tongue,” no matter how much time they spend speaking English as a lingua franca. And being addressed in your mother tongue has impact – after all, also members of the EU Parliament are “just” human beings, believe it or not. So, multi-lingualism, no matter how strong its effect on the election outcome, obviously did play a role in the strategy von der Leyen as a political pro and demonstrated cosmopolitan chose to get her story across.

Talking about politicians as human beings and storytellers – here comes my last point: stories and people cannot be separated. Von der Leyen today chose to switch back to German at the end of her speech to talk about her personal story – the story of her upbringing by a politician father who taught her what it means to create peace based on international trade and diplomacy. This passage was emphatic and of course it was meant to melt the hearts

of those who, even after the speech and all rational argumentation, oppose her candidacy. Still, this part was above all one thing: authentic. People can deconstruct dissertations and point to plagiarism. But they cannot deconstruct the personal narrative of a person because this story, after all, has turned the person into the individual he/she is today. Memories only exist in the minds of people, of course, but that does not minimize the fact that certain events happened the way they happened. As a matter of fact, von der Leyen was born in Brussels and raised in an international environment. The story of someone longing to shape international politics is thus credible in the sense of “the story makes sense.” If it is helpful and effective content-wise, we might find out soon.

I just wondered why she chose to tell the personal story at the very end. The old Greeks established the Golden Rule of rhetoric according to which every good story includes the following elements in exactly this sequence: 1) Ethos, 2) Pathos, 3) Logos. The first part, ethos, aims at establishing integrity. You tell something about yourself in order to convince people that you are credible and that you have the authority to talk about a certain topic. From my perspective, her personal background currently is the most important factor in support of her authority to talk about her vision of Europe. But, as I am also aware of, starting an official talk, the most important one in one’s career, with your personal story, is highly risky. People can go like: “Right, now she is pulling the emotional trigger; talking about her dad and her family. This is not what will help us if she takes office.”

Here we go again to the starting point of my argument. Telling stories might be a risky thing but it is decisive. No matter if one does it at the end of a speech or at the beginning. No matter if one does so in written or oral format and in which language. Words have power and if you want them to unfold that power, they have to be attached to people – in good and bad times. Writing is therefore as much in fashion as it has always been. After all, most spoken

words in politics have a written basis. And the same applies to most other crucial decision-making situations in life and business. How do companies win contracts? Do they tweet or send text messages? No, they have to convince their clients based on a very concise and thoroughly crafted proposal. These are the “pitches” that have power: black letters on white paper. I encourage you to think about this and I encourage all those writers in the world even more: Your skill is powerful and your ability to switch between different languages, genres, and styles even more – especially in a multi-cultural, diverse, and digital world.