

PART I

Rhetorical
Criticism from
the Viewpoint of
Rhetorical
Citizenship



Is Rhetorical Criticism Subversive of Democracy?

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Statement of the problem

For nearly 45 years I have studied and taught rhetorical criticism, the analysis and interpretation of public discourse in order to explain, evaluate, and change social practices. I saw myself as contributing in a small way to democratic life. I still do – rest assured that I am not entering into some late midlife crisis. But as I have thought about public discourse, and about governance in democracy, and about our complicated current predicaments, I'm not sure that rhetorical criticism is always a positive force. There may be a dark side to both popular and academic rhetorical criticism which we would do well to identify and try to ameliorate.

Rhetoric builds community through appeals to common bonds and transcendent values. There is an element of mystery in such appeals, and by demystifying rhetoric, explaining everything, criticism may prevent rhetoric from doing its work. This risk is especially serious for democracies since rhetorical appeals are their only means for mobilizing public judgment and decision. Can we have strong rhetorical practice and strong criticism too, or are the two inherently at odds?

I have raised a provocative question, perhaps even an outlandish one: Is rhetorical criticism subversive of democracy? To forecast my answer, it is “not necessarily.” Yet the danger is real. The argument I'll advance is somewhat indirect. Most of my examples will come from the United States, because I know it best, but I believe that the questions and concerns I raise speak to the human condition at this moment, without geographical limitation. I will proceed in four steps: (1) clarifying what I mean by “citizenship,” “rhetoric,” and “democracy,” (2) explaining how “rhetorical citizenship” is achieved through “democratic deliberation” which is itself a rhetorical en-

terprise, (3) describing how democratic deliberation builds identification as a counter to the natural divisions among people, and (4) identifying and discussing potential threats to democratic deliberation posed by rhetorical criticism, and also their possible remedies.

Citizenship, rhetoric, and democracy

My argument pivots around the relationships among three key terms: citizenship, rhetoric, and democracy. All three terms are used in multiple ways, so I need to make clear where I am going with each of them.

Citizenship is the enactment of the individual's relationship to the polity, whether it is local, state or regional, national, or global. Most of us, in fact, enact this attachment at multiple levels. "Thin" expressions of citizenship include voting, paying taxes, performing military service, and holding a passport. In these cases the attachment to the polity may be weak or indirect. Other forms, such as attending to the news, campaigning for public office, and undertaking legal action to protect one's rights, require more active engagement.

Kock and Villadsen propose that citizenship be understood as rhetorical, "in the sense that important civic functions take place in deliberation among citizens, and that discourse is not prefatory to real action but is in many ways constitutive of civic engagement" (2012, p. 1). I share their view: what makes citizenship active rather than passive is its rhetorical character.

Once freed of its widespread negative stereotypes in everyday usage, *rhetoric* is understood as both an academic discipline and a social practice. Ordinary people engage in it and academics study it. Our studies seek both to strengthen and perpetuate the discipline through the deepening of theoretical insight, and also to analyze and interpret the practice of rhetoric in society. We understand rhetoric broadly as about the relationships between messages and people.

We tend to distinguish between rhetorical practice and rhetorical criticism – between performance, on the one hand, and analysis, interpretation, and judgment on the other. But this is in some sense a false dichotomy. Analysis and criticism of rhetoric in society should also help to improve rhetorical practice, whether of the rhetors we study, or others, or our own. Likewise, efforts to develop or improve skills should make us more sensitive to how, and how well, those skills are deployed in society. In practice, however, we have reified the distinction, teaching and studying the arts of

rhetoric separately from the analysis and criticism of rhetoric. The former forms the substance of courses in public speaking and the goal of consultants and coaches of politicians and business executives. The latter becomes the province of academics. The former emphasizes rhetoric's potential; the latter, its limitations. The former is typically local and private in its orientation; the latter concerns discourse in the public sphere. Rhetoricians may train people to be good speakers or writers, but critics may argue that these people deploy their newly acquired skills in futile pursuits if they aim to make a difference in the public sphere, because rhetoric may be only a cover for the impersonal forces that really control public life. If it conveys the message that individuals have no agency, rhetorical criticism is indeed subversive of democracy. It "teaches" that individuals might as well opt out of public life and it implies that the inevitable stalemates in the public sphere ultimately will be overcome not through discursive engagement but through anarchy; surrender to authoritarianism; whim, fashion, or caprice; a crisis so dire that it upends presumptions about what is possible; or even violence. Even democracies fall victim occasionally to these forces, but to depend on them is to deny the prospect of democracy itself.

Fortunately, the converse is also true. If rhetorical criticism and rhetorical practice can be rejoined, if academic and scholarly critics adopt Kenneth Burke's comic rather than tragic frame¹ so that rhetoric is seen as the comic corrective to impersonal social forces, then rhetorical criticism can strengthen rather than subvert democracy. Rhetoric can become a means for working through seemingly intractable conflicts, exploring alternative frames of reference, identifying what is at issue and distinguishing between the trivial and the crucial, determining when consensus is possible and when it is not, and building legitimacy for a majority's decision while respecting the minority's rights.

But I am getting ahead of myself here. I have talked about what I mean by "citizenship" and "rhetoric," but not yet about "democracy." And "democracy" is a charismatic term² – positive in its connotations (at least it is now, unlike in the 18th century when it was equated with mob rule) but

¹ See Burke (1959) [1937], esp. pp. 92-105, for a discussion of the comic and tragic frames.

² The concept of "charismatic terms," terms of great potency but unclear referents, is explained in Weaver (1953), pp. 227-232.

attached to widely differing referents. Abraham Lincoln perhaps defined it best when he called it “government of the people, by the same people.”³ Sovereignty resides ultimately and collectively with those who also are subjects of the regime. Rulers and ruled are the same. If government violates the people’s rights or liberties, the people have the prerogative of altering it. If the people desire an outcome that is within the scope of government, they have the power through majority vote to bring it about. But since a majority vote could be used to enshrine tyranny and to undercut democracy itself (as happened in Germany in 1934), fundamental rights of the minority are protected. Anti-majoritarian provisions assure that a regime based on majority rule can prevail since the minority of one day becomes the majority of the next.

The core elements of democracy, then, are the identity between rulers and ruled, majority rule, and minority rights. Certainly democracy is not a necessary condition for rhetoric. One need only recall the public address of Hitler and Stalin to recognize that totalitarian rulers can evoke raw emotion, constitute individuals as a mob, and convert the will to act into violent action. These in large measure are rhetorical outcomes, despise them though we may. They remind us of Aristotle’s dictum that rhetoric is a neutral instrument that can be used for good or for ill.

On the other hand, rhetoric may well be a necessary condition for democracy, or at least for a healthy and functioning one. It fits comfortably with the recognition that people must come to collective decisions and act in the face of matters that are uncertain and contingent, about which we do not have all the information we would like. It recognizes that people are fallible, that decisions and commitments can be reviewed, that majorities and minorities may trade places, that controversies often are managed rather than ultimately resolved, and that great issues can remain contested over time.⁴

Democracy is sometimes confused with two other notions that share its trappings but not necessarily its substance. One is elections. They are a valuable and efficient means to determine the will of the majority, but they are not democracy itself. What if only a single candidate is allowed to

³ “Message to Congress in Special Session, July 4, 1861.” In: *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953), 4:426. The phrasing anticipates that of the Gettysburg Address.

⁴ On the importance of democracy’s acknowledging human fallibility, see especially Thorson (1962).

run? What if there is an “inside” candidate and opposition supporters are intimidated so that they do not vote? What if the turnout is very low or the voters are unrepresentative of the total population? What if the counting of the ballots is suspect? Each of these things has happened in my lifetime, and each undercuts the legitimacy of an election. The citizen-voters are not in fact the rulers; the will of the majority is not being carried out; the rights of the minority are not protected. These are not democratic elections.

Second, democracy is sometimes confused with an extreme form of populism, in which an inherent division is assumed between “elites” and “the people.” Rulers and ruled are not drawn from the same category. Elites never can represent the wishes of the people, even if chosen by them, because their interests as elites are at odds with the interests of the people. The goal of the elites is to preserve and build upon their own power. One way to do that is to oppress the people, but that might precipitate revolution. A better way is to appear to share the people’s values and interests while actually co-opting them. Thus, for example, an officeholder may claim to support “family values” while opposing specific legislative measures to benefit families, such as family medical leave or child care allowances, even if a majority of the people support them. The officeholder is not necessarily being dishonest (although he or she may be), but according to this view of democracy, the officeholder is undemocratic. There is no doubt that this scenario in which elites co-opt the people sometimes develops. But it is a mistake to think that it is *inherent*, that there is a perpetual class struggle. To believe that is to advocate not democracy but anarchy, for there is no way by which the will of the people can be made effective. And the critic of public discourse who presumes that the practice of the culture is in such a state will have a ready-made and all-purpose interpretation at the ready: discourse is a mask for power, pure and simple. The critic may argue that individuals lack agency because their discourse is smothered by the intractable power struggle. Nuance does not matter; audience adaptation does not matter. These are only clever tricks to instill a kind of false consciousness among the people. Such an account, to say the least, is overdetermined.

There is another understanding of “democracy” that makes good sense at first glance. If the goal is for decisions to reflect the will of the people, why not ask each person (or a representative sample) his or her opinion, tabulate the responses, and present the answer? But the view of democracy as polling has two basic flaws. First, it neglects a sense of the commons and

makes the public nothing more than an aggregate of individuals. “What is best for the country (or society)” reduces to “What do I like?” when these in fact are not identical. Second, this is at best a “thin” form of democracy. Poll numbers generally do not reflect either intensity of belief or the degree of information on which it is based. They yield inconsistent results, partly because people may be inconsistent (approving of social programs but not wanting to fund them, for instance) but also because answers to the pollster may be superficial or because answers are highly sensitive to the specific wording of a question. A richer, or “thicker” conception of democracy would promote the expression of reasoned, considered opinions as the basis for public judgment. For this reason, political scientist James Fishkin and his colleagues have experimented with what they call “deliberative opinion polling,” obtaining people’s opinions after they have been involved in structured discussion on the topic.

Deliberative opinion polling has been criticized on grounds of practicality, but it reflects the insight that rhetorical scholars often find congenial: that deliberation is the essence of democracy, or (as it is sometimes said) that democracy exists in communication. Realizing this insight, some have theorized about what they have called “deliberative democracy.” The term, coined in 1980 by Joseph M. Bessette, refers to a system in which conflict is resolved and disagreement addressed through “open and uncoerced discussion.”⁵ The assumption is that “political agreement can be reached on the basis of principles that can be justified to others.”⁶ What determines the value of an idea or proposal is its ability on its own merits to influence others. Deliberation is characterized by giving and seeking reasons. What emerges is collective rationality – what the decision-making group as a whole considers to be reasonable. This is not necessarily the same as a simple aggregation of individual preferences, because presumably individuals will transform their preferences to take others’ views into account. This approach to decision making is fundamentally rhetorical, because the justifications people provide for their views are justifications *to an audience*. They are not deduced like syllogisms but are premised on the beliefs and values of a deliberating community in a specific situation.

⁵ I discuss strengths and flaws of the deliberative-democracy research in Zarefsky (2008), pp. 131-153.

⁶ Guttman and Thompson (2003), p. 33.

Nevertheless, the deliberative democracy literature is largely theoretical and abstract. There are but a few empirical applications, and they involve contrived situations. The literature is based on the normative but counterfactual situation of “open and uncoerced discussion,” which seldom if ever obtains. Deliberative democracy also envisions relatively small discussion groups as the model, not an entire society or its representatives pursuing collective decisions about war or peace, taxation, the role of government in the economy, the tension between national and local interests, the general welfare, or any of the other topics usually placed under “public policy.” But deliberative democracy does make clear that rhetoric has a central role to play. Rhetorical sensitivity can rehabilitate the concept of deliberative democracy and can invigorate its practice – if rhetorical criticism will allow it to.

Democratic deliberation and rhetorical citizenship

Armed with that premise, scholars such as Kock and Villadsen are fleshing out a concept of rhetorical citizenship based upon a more empirical understanding of deliberation, and scholars such as Tracy are conducting empirical studies, particularly of representative governing bodies at the local level.⁷ These studies reflect the fact that discussion is not usually “open and uncoerced.” People bring with them the baggage of their own circumstances, ranging from class and economic self-interest to personal identity and political ideology, and they evaluate others’ ideas within the context of these commitments. Discussion moves that might violate conventional norms of decorum or politeness are not condemned out of hand; they are examined for an understanding of their function in widening or narrowing the viewpoints under consideration, and for facilitating decisions or slowing the rush to consensus.

What is not so generally realized is that the same processes of rhetorical deliberation evolve as a larger society works toward public decisions. Citizens read and listen about issues from a wide variety of information sources, incorporating what they learn into a pre-existing set of knowledge and beliefs, adjusting the set when necessary to incorporate new or discordant elements. Leaders write and talk about these issues, trying to make connections between their ideals and proposals, on the one hand, and the audience’s beliefs and values, on the other. Interested parties try to arouse others’ interest

⁷ See, for example, Tracy (2010).

and support through a wide variety of media and presentational choices. On the surface, the process hardly resembles a conversation, much less a meeting of a decision-making body. But in a larger sense, that is exactly what it is – a wide-ranging conversation across space and time in which a loosely defined but vast body of individuals comes to a collective sense of its identity, its values, and its priorities – or, in the case of a stalemate, fails to do so.

A rhetor anticipating or confronting such a broad audience does not begin in a vacuum. Every society, as Bourdieu asserts, has unquestioned assumptions that are widely believed as if they were facts – whether because, as he claims, those in power want to present contestable claims as if they were settled, or simply as a result of socialization into a culture.⁸ For example, many Europeans find it hard to understand why in the United States gun control is such a troublesome issue even in the face of clear evidence that guns easily get into the wrong hands and lead to unnecessary violence, sometimes on a massive scale. It *is* hard to understand, at least until one recognizes this issue as the latest instantiation of ideas that trace back to the American founding: distrust of and hostility toward government, which is seen as the people's enemy rather than as their agent; a strong emphasis on individualism and self-reliance rather than communal action as the best guarantor of safety and security; the historical experience of colonists in Boston in the 1770s who were forced to quarter British soldiers in their private homes and who sought means of self-defense; and the belief that local militias offered better defense against enemies than did national standing armies which easily could be turned against the people instead. Taking stock of these cultural facts does not decisively tip the scales against gun control, of course, for there are multiple considerations on the other side. But it does help to explain why the question is controversial and divisive, even in the face of tragedies such as the recent mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. And it does make clear the burden on the advocates of gun control: either to demonstrate to the public's satisfaction that proposed measures will not jeopardize this set of prevailing beliefs or to provide a convincing explanation for why the set should be altered or overthrown.

Participants in a controversy such as this one on gun control may not consciously recognize that this is their task, caught up as they are in their own advocacy. But that is where the rhetorical critic comes in, either con-

⁸ Bourdieu (1979), cited in von der Lippe (2012), p. 165.

structively by advising advocates on the structure of audience beliefs and the burden the advocates face, or analytically by accounting for the presence and significance of these predispositions. Too often, references to context treat it just as historical background, useful for knowing what is happening at the time, without recognizing its constitutive nature with regard to the controversy at hand. Understanding public discourse as extended democratic deliberation might make us more sensitive to this problem.

Democratic deliberation and identification

How are we to understand what happens in a deliberating group or society? What is the rhetorical process involved, how is it democratic, and in what ways might it be threatened by rhetorical criticism?

People are by nature divided, Kenneth Burke has written.⁹ They are separated from one another by differences in experience, thought, feeling, motivation, and interest, among other things. Each of us is a solitary being, yet persistent solitude is unpleasant and uncomfortable, so we are also by nature social. Burke's maxim is that "identification is compensatory to division."¹⁰ We identify with others when they fit our ideas into their values and vice-versa. When that happens, we can understand how they think and what they value. We see their viewpoint as fitting within our own. More than that, Burke employs religious imagery in maintaining that we become "consubstantial" with them – metaphorically, we become one. We come to see ourselves as parts of the same whole, with which we both affiliate.

But how does this happen? Participants in deliberation try out their stories on one another, exchanging them and comparing others' stories with their own. In referring to stories, I mean the accounts that people offer to explain their world-views or frames of reference. The stories may be narratives with characters and plot, but they also may take the form of arguments, descriptions, or explanations. The participants' goal is to have stories that match, so that you can see yours in mine and vice-versa. When that happens, the deliberation has produced a common story. Sometimes all or nearly all will need to accept the story for the deliberation to be successful; sometimes a supermajority will be required; sometimes a simple majority. Sometimes the deliberation will not succeed in its primary goal but nevertheless will have

⁹ Burke (1969) [1950], esp. p. 22.

¹⁰ Burke, (1969) [1950], p. 22.

identified the precise matters about which there is disagreement and will succeed in clarifying the different positions and developing an understanding of how they will be tested.

This abstract model of deliberation, of course, is enacted in real time, with real actors operating with real baggage. They will try to do one or more of three things. First, advocates may seek *transcendent* appeals – ones that will subsume whatever are the matters on which the advocates disagree. In the recent fiscal-policy debates in my country, for example, the conviction that we must not go over the “fiscal cliff” induced the deliberators to reach at least a semblance of agreement. The need to build “a common European home” during the 1990s likewise subsumed competing nationalistic desires even though those forces remained active. If deliberators can see their interests subsumed within a common vision, to that degree they will see themselves as united, members of the same community pursuing the same goal.

A second possibility is for advocates to develop *multivocal* appeals, messages that attract people’s support for different reasons and that may even mean different things to different people. Division is overcome through a unified message that people can understand each in his or her own way yet all can support. A contemporary example is “income tax reform,” which can be understood as meaning anything from eliminating loopholes and deductions to making tax rates sharply more (or less) progressive. A wide swath of the U.S. public views “tax reform” favorably as an essential component of a solution to the problem of the U.S. national debt, but they do not all mean the same thing by the phrase. A famous 19th century example was the term “popular sovereignty,” which for a decade papered over differences within the Democratic Party about whether territories did or did not have the right to prevent the introduction of slavery before they became states. Multivocal appeals depend on a certain degree of ambiguity; their power to build consensus is lost if they are rendered too precise. They function in a way similar to what political scientist Murray Edelman, borrowing from anthropologist Edward Sapir, called “condensation symbols”; they condense into one symbol a wide range of ideas and referents that might otherwise diverge.¹¹

A third option is for advocates to formulate *displacement* appeals, those that lead advocates to abandon one commitment and to replace it with another, having been convinced that the new commitment is more compatible

¹¹ Edelman (1964), p. 6; Sapir (1934).

with the person's belief system than was the old. This is the most overt case of people changing their minds. This happens occasionally, especially if the original commitment is not very strong. What is more likely is to establish that a person's original commitment leads him or her to results that he or she finds unacceptable, rejecting it for that reason, and adopting the proposed alternative in order to avoid a vacuum. This is a particular illustration of the circumstantial *ad hominem* argument.¹² For example, a person believing that there should be absolutely no government involvement in the economy might be confronted with the knowledge that this position is at odds with a call for government to provide funds to rebuild one's town after it has been hit by a major national disaster – a view which our hypothetical citizen also supports, having been a victim of a hurricane in the past. The pull of personal interest might prove stronger than that of abstract principle, and being aware of the tension between the two might induce our hypothetical citizen to abandon the unyielding opposition to any and all government involvement in the economy.

Transcendence, multivocality, and displacement are three examples of strategic appeals that a deliberating group or a larger society can use to move from division toward identification. But exactly how they work involves something of a “black box.” Forty years ago, Ernest Bormann (1972) proposed that people tell stories exchanging what he called “fantasy themes” and that these “chain out” in a group as they resonate with others. People pick up on a particular theme because it “speaks to them.” They elaborate on its meaning, develop additional implications, carry a metaphor further, or find an additional application, and thereby join with others in commitment to the theme. Bormann used “fantasy theme” as a somewhat technical term, but the process of “chaining out” may have more general application.

An obvious example would be the acceptance of “war” as a metaphor to describe what took place on September 11, 2001. The dominant story might have been that there was a monstrous crime, or that it was the act of insane and deluded people on a massive scale, or that this was the assertion by a non-state actor of the prerogatives of a state, or something else. But these options gained little traction because the metaphor of “war” so quickly chained out that it became the normalized way to describe these terrible

¹² On this use of the *ad hominem* argument, see Johnstone (1959), p. 73, p. 76; Walton (1998), pp. 2-6.

events. More recently, the September 11, 2012 attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya, has come to be understood as a terrorist act rather than – as some in the U.S. intelligence community had maintained – only the spontaneous and unplanned consequence of a protest demonstration. As a different story chained out from the one the early commentators had used, they were perceived not just as mistaken but as dangerously naïve.

The trajectory by which a story chains out, however, is not predetermined and always could be otherwise. It is contingent and depends upon intervening variables ranging from contemporaneous events to the ideological predisposition of the decision makers. This fact underscores the rhetorical nature of deliberation. Rhetoric is situational; it is grounded in particulars rather than following law-like generalizations. It is an art, not a science. Its outcome depends upon the inventional resources and aptitude of individuals in a given moment. And since it cannot be fully or definitively explained, it contains an element of mystery. This element keeps rhetorical practice open and potential, not closed and definitive. It preserves the possibility of rebuttal, and therefore is foundational to democracy.

Rhetorical criticism and threats to democratic deliberation

This brings me at last to the concern I raised at the outset. If rhetoric in society depends on an element of mystery, then rhetorical criticism, in seeking to demystify what is going on, poses a potential threat. It may contribute to the paralysis of democratic deliberation that is so often noted today. Surely this paralysis has many other causes, such as sharply increased political polarization, the recognition of limits, and the emergence of seemingly intractable positions. But rhetorical criticism, if it presumes to explain too fully, may leave no room for rhetors to use the resources of invention to work creatively in the face of these challenges. And, of course, if democracy is paralyzed and grinds to a halt, necessary decisions will be made and actions taken by non-democratic means.

Both everyday and academic rhetorical criticism can reveal this dark side, in two different ways in each case. I begin with the everyday. First, political actors can too easily become rhetorical critics, not accepting others' words at face value nor even retaining a healthy skepticism, but scrutinizing their discourse to determine what it "really" means beneath the surface. Recent politics furnishes some examples. Unencumbered by evidence, a non-trivial number of people continue to believe that President Obama is a

Muslim socialist who was born in Kenya. Documents establishing the contrary are dismissed as forgeries or otherwise inauthentic, as clever devices to obscure the truth and prop up illegitimate holders of power. German chancellor Angela Merkel's call for a more integrated euro zone is disdained on the grounds that what she "really" is trying to do is to reassert German dominance of the European continent. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's recent illness was said to be faked, statements of medical experts to the contrary notwithstanding, because she wanted to avoid having to testify before the Congressional committee investigating the Benghazi tragedy that was, it was said, highly critical of the State Department.

These examples are especially disconcerting because they call into question such fundamentals as the nature of fact and evidence. Even more, they divide people into radically different communities with different standards of knowledge and belief – each of which can perpetuate itself by insulating its members from exposure to alternative viewpoints – rather than a single community of people who hold diverse opinions. Without sharing such basic beliefs about the world, they cannot deliberate together and instead either withdraw into their separate enclaves or else engage in full-scale culture wars.

It is easy to disparage such blatant disregard for fact. But a second way by which advocates try to become rhetorical critics is harder to dismiss. Consider as an example a book that appeared almost a decade ago, Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (2004). While he writes specifically about the state of Kansas, Frank's argument applies far more broadly to significant elements of the U.S. population. Noting that a century ago Kansas was a hotbed of radical populism, Frank asks how it has happened that the state has come to be dominated by social conservatives who do not represent the economic self-interest of the people. His answer, in a nutshell, is that a generation of people has been led to vote against its own self-interests, rejecting government economic policies that actually would help them, because they have given priority to ideologically conservative beliefs about social topics such as abortion, religion, and marriage, which somehow trump their economic self-interest. I happen to share Frank's wish that Kansas would return to its more radical roots, but I find his analysis flawed. It reduces legitimate grounds for voting to personal economic self-interest alone, implying that the people of Kansas are misguided if they cast their votes on any other grounds. This both exalts the economic over other dimensions of a person's life and also suggests that people should select officials and policies

not on the basis of what they think is good for society as a whole but only on the basis of what will benefit them personally. The people of Kansas surely are not the only ones who sometimes allow the common good to trump their personal self-interest. I myself have sometimes supported measures for which I would need to pay even though I would not benefit from them personally, in the belief that they were beneficial to society as a whole and that, in the given case, that was more important. This preference for the public over the private is what the 18th century understood as the meaning of virtue.

If Frank's recommendations to vote based on economic self-interest were widely adopted, there would be no need for deliberation, because there would be nothing to discuss with others. Each person could calculate his or her own self-interest and vote on that basis; the results could be tallied up; and the outcome would be that choice which the greatest number of individuals saw as being in their self-interest. This approach would stop deliberation in its tracks and would substitute a thin for a robust sense of democracy. If one agrees with Frank's underlying ideological position, then one should focus not on the fact that social values can trump self-interest but on the particular social values that the people of Kansas have been persuaded to accept.

The two approaches to amateur rhetorical criticism I've described here seem to be opposites. One is marked by disregard for "the facts" and the surface claims of discourse, in the belief that they are but a cover for deeper underlying motivations that the would-be critic would expose. The other is marked by reduction of discourse to *only* "the facts," and to a narrow conception of them at that – economic self-interest. But they actually share a most disturbing feature. They stymie continued deliberation. If "the truth" really is secret and known only to a privileged few, then deliberation is pointless. If "the truth" reduces to facts that are not disputable, then deliberation is unnecessary. And if, as I've claimed above, deliberation is constitutive of democracy, then discouraging deliberation is indeed subversive of democracy.

What is worse, these positions are not easily refuted. Can one prove conclusively that the President is not a Muslim or that he was not born in Kenya? The documents on which one would rely would be dismissed by the would-be critic as forgeries or corrupted by misinterpretation. The reaction is the same as that to conspiracy rhetoric:¹³ if a suspect denies that he or she is in on the plot, isn't that exactly what you would expect a devious conspirator

¹³ An excellent review of the literature on conspiracy arguments is Pfau (2005), chap. 1.

to do? The argument that seemingly would deny the charge is reinterpreted to support it instead. The preposterous claims become self-sealing.¹⁴ If the allegations cannot be dislodged on their own terms, the remedy must be to shift the terms – objecting to the line of argument because it is destructive of individual freedom, or perhaps subjecting it to ridicule through a circumstantial *ad hominem* showing that the self-sealing argument can be used against its own perpetrator.

But it is not just the amateur critics about whom I worry. There are problematic tendencies in academic rhetorical criticism as well. Here I am understanding “critical” in “rhetorical criticism” as meaning “analytical” or “reflective,” not “negative” or “hostile.” The academic subfield of rhetorical criticism has made immense advances in the past sixty years, evolving from a formula-based approach that proved primarily that any discourse could be sorted out into pre-defined categories taken from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. One of the more significant advances has been the productive complication of the concept of agency. Even sixty years ago, it seemed strange to judge a speech a failure in a situation in which the speaker had no realistic possibility of success to start with. Assuming complete agency on the speaker’s part was undoubtedly naïve. Attributing a more limited sense of agency to the speaker, and granting agency to situational, social, economic, and ideological forces has made the critic’s task more difficult but has produced criticism of greater sophistication and force.

One very strong move in this direction was the “critical rhetoric” project undertaken by Raymie McKerrow (1989). McKerrow urged a special focus on the relationship between rhetoric and power. Discourse can be used by the powerful as an instrument to maintain power, even if it professes neutrality or openness to critique. Meanwhile, it can be extremely difficult for insurgent challengers to employ discourse as a means to equalize or threaten power in the way enacted by social protest movements of the 1960s. These are important insights, and one of the clearest trends in rhetorical criticism over the past decade is the growing emphasis on power and ideology as explanations for the strength or weakness of discourse.

Here too, though, I think there is at least a potential problem. It is tempting to infer from the influence of power and ideology that they are

¹⁴ The concept of “self-sealing arguments” comes from Robert J. Fogelin. See, for example, Fogelin and Sinnott-Armstrong (1997), pp. 353-357.

completely deterministic, explaining the outcome of rhetorical acts without remainder. If it is all power, all the way down, then as a practical matter there is no need to undertake the criticism, because we already know the answer before we ask the question. If everything can be explained by patriarchy, or exploitation of labor, or white privilege, or any other ideology to which one might subscribe, then rhetoric itself is rendered inert. And from the viewpoint of the rhetors we study, if our criticism were convincing and they came to understand that rhetoric was inert, then there would be no reason for them to engage in deliberation. Deliberation is a sham, on this view; the real game is amassing or overturning power, and – with apologies to Clausewitz – rhetoric becomes the continuation of warfare by other means.

Furthermore, ideological criticism, when “taken to the end of the line” in the manner I am imagining, is also self-sealing. A critic who disputes the force of ideology easily could be accused of displaying “false consciousness,” having been seduced by the hegemony of that ideological force. Not realizing the determinism of ideology, he or she would posit the existence of rhetorical agency, thereby revealing only that he or she didn’t “get it” and causing the challenging criticism to be dismissed rather than taken seriously. This result is even more likely to come about if the discourse being examined is itself ideologically driven, situated in a controversy in which the participants appear to have completely different world-views and the dispute among them is marked by “deep disagreement.”¹⁵

The problem with this approach is that it is at odds with what we know about rhetoric itself: that it is grounded in specific situations and that it arises in moments that are uncertain and contingent. Robert Ivie put it this way in an e-mail exchange he and I had on this topic: “Our field seems inclined to locate rhetoric under the sign of ideology, which sacrifices rhetoric’s potential for addressing pragmatically the problem of perceived incommensurability. Rhetoric doesn’t require us to solve these divisions completely or universally. It is situational and adaptive.”¹⁶ I would add that we sell our own subject short when we pretend otherwise.

I suspect that I have constructed a caricature of ideological criticism; I hope so. There is no particular example I can cite of criticism that

¹⁵ I discuss the problem of “deep disagreement” and some possible rhetorical moves to overcome it in Zarefsky (2012). The term “deep disagreement” comes from Fogelin (1985).

¹⁶ Robert L. Ivie, e-mail message to the author, March 16, 2012.

takes ideology all the way “to the end of the line,” certainly not the work of McKerrow. But I confess that I occasionally read essays in our journals that make me wonder if this is the direction in which we are heading, and that lead me to issue a pre-emptive warning against following that path. We need to find and produce criticism of rhetorical moments when ideology is present and yet not deterministic, in which creative invention blunts, sets aside, limits, or challenges its influence. Periods of ideological turbulence and change offer especially rich resources for such studies.

Another potential challenge to academic rhetorical criticism is that, despite what I said before that “critical” does not mean “hostile,” there may be a tendency for critics to “go negative.” It’s my sense, and I could be wrong, that we write more often in condemnation of our subjects than in praise. In part, there is a natural asymmetry here. The sublime does not require detailed analysis. In fact, to explain its success is to detract from its artistry: great art conceals art. Rhetorical masterpieces are to be appreciated for what they are. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that there are relatively few critical works, for example, that examine the speeches ranked near the top of the rhetorical scholars’ “top 100” list.¹⁷ On the other hand, weaker performances may cry out for critical attention – to explain where they went wrong and to propose how they might have gone better, or at least what other, more promising alternatives might have been available.

Even beyond this basic asymmetry, however, I suspect that there may be a critical preference for the negative. It may reflect the tendency of many scholars to be skeptical generally. Or it may reflect a tendency not to write approvingly of rhetorical efforts if one disagrees with the conclusions they advance. The furor caused almost 40 years ago by Forbes Hill’s sympathetic reading of Richard Nixon’s “Vietnamization” speech is still with us.¹⁸ I find it noteworthy that, while there are guarded readings of President George W. Bush’s address to Congress after the tragedy of September 11,¹⁹ there is hardly any sympathetic reading of any of his other speeches, including his

¹⁷ In 1999, a panel of over 130 rhetorical scholars was asked to identify the top 100 speeches delivered in the United States during the twentieth century. The list and copies of the top 100 texts can be found in Lucas and Medhurst (2009).

¹⁸ Hill (1972a). For alternative viewpoints, see Newman (1970); Campbell (1972); Hill (1972b).

¹⁹ For example, Murphy (2003); Zarefsky (2004).

Second Inaugural Address, which – like it or not – is a masterful presentation of the theories of democracy promotion and American exceptionalism, on which his presidency was based. Likewise, there are few if any attempts to read sympathetically the discourse of the Tea Party in defense of limited government that has echoes of Thomas Jefferson, or the social-policy discourse of conservatives who oppose abortion consistently without exceptions. I do not agree with any of these positions, but the fact is that they are legitimate rhetorical stances, rich in *topoi* with deep historical resonance. For that matter, with the exception of one or two specific speeches he gave before becoming president, there have been few sympathetic readings of the speeches of Barack Obama.

Now, a preference for condemnation over appreciation might have no serious consequences if we did not imagine academic rhetorical criticism having any impact beyond illustrating the act of criticism itself. But we usually imagine that criticism can make a difference in shaping the course of public deliberation. Critical discourse that is long on blame and short on praise will offer little guidance about how to advance discussion of important public issues, other than a steady stream of admonitions to “avoid this.” Moreover, it will induce cynicism about the critics, or about the act of criticism itself, that will harm the prospects for its use in deliberation. The cynicism will be justified, especially if critics hold the rhetorical performance up to the standards of an impossible ideal, as is done in some of the “deliberative democracy” literature. As Hauser points out, if everyday debates are measured by the standards of ideal speech, negative evaluation will be guaranteed.²⁰ This too is essentially a non-rhetorical evaluation because it does not reflect the grounding of rhetoric in specific situations.

Perhaps even more than sympathetic criticism, there is a need for constructive criticism, that is, rhetorical criticism that not only identifies our predicaments but also proposes ways to work through them. The needs for such “work around” proposals can be seen acutely in the United States, which now has experienced 20 years of persistent political gridlock and stalemated discourse, but it probably characterizes much of the world facing seemingly intractable problems without deep reservoirs of political sensitivity or good will. Ivie expressed this concern to me when he wrote, “There probably is more of this kind of constructive rhetorical scholarship going on

²⁰ This is one of the themes of Hauser (1999). It is referred to in Klugeff (2012), p. 101.

than I know about, but I suspect there is relatively little of it and certainly less of it than is needed to direct the field's considerable intellectual capital toward constructively addressing the challenges of the present era."²¹

Situations perceived as deadlocked, after all, are tailor-made for rhetorical intervention – for imagining things in a different way, for shifting the frame of reference, for introducing a new term or a new hierarchy of terms or a new definition of a term, for all the ways in which rhetors and audiences might take a new look at an old problem. To the degree that such conversations take place, they are usually proprietary, between political leaders and their advisers, and they are dismissed by others as nothing more than “spin.” But democratic deliberation would be enhanced if the conversation were broadened, if rhetorical critics took up topics like these: How can we overcome the frustrating impasse about the size and role of government that is at the heart of the “fiscal crisis” in the United States and, I suspect, in the European Union as well? How can we reconcile the seeming deep disagreement between faith in the government and faith in the market? How do we decide what values are universal and exportable and which are culture-specific and not the business of ‘outsiders,’ and how do we regard a value such as “democracy” that belongs to some degree in both categories? In a time of increased religiosity around the world and the rise of fundamentalism in all religions, how can we respect religious differences while also respecting religious belief and practice? How can those who believe that prophecy has ceased engage in productive dialogue with those who claim to have received the word of God? How can we reconcile a commitment to equal opportunity with the realities of unequal achievement? And how can we reconcile a commitment to free and unfettered expression with the recognition that speech has consequences?

Hard questions, these. They pose seemingly sharp dichotomies. But if that is the final answer, they cannot be resolved by democratic deliberation. They will be subject to the whims of shifting majorities or through deference to authority or appeal to force. Democracy will wither as citizens withdraw from the public sphere in the belief that democratic deliberation is futile and that the outcome will not matter to them anyway. If, on the other hand, rhetorical critics can take up these questions and begin to offer constructive alternatives, the benefits are huge. We can revitalize the study of invention

²¹ Ivie, e-mail message to the author, March 16, 2012.

by rhetoricizing the situational context and then deriving possibilities from our own creativity and our understanding of rhetorical traditions. We can give more credibility to our critical judgments by suggesting alternatives to those we criticize, rather than merely offering critiques. We can give potency to what Robert Asen has called “a discourse theory of citizenship” (2004) by explaining and showing how it works, how the process of public deliberation is the enactment of citizenship. And we thereby can make rhetorical criticism an instrument of democracy rather than a possible threat to it.

The four potential threats to democracy I’ve discussed – two from everyday rhetorical criticism and two from academic rhetorical criticism – have in common that they deny the richness of rhetoric itself, especially its grounding in specific situations and its inventional possibilities. Revitalization of democracy springs from a healthy respect for and use of these very features of rhetoric. This is only one of many ways in which we might orient our intellectual resources. We will need to respond to cynics who may accuse us of being overly optimistic or naïve, but the potential rewards of this effort are vast. Perhaps most of all, we will take the idea of “rhetorical citizenship” seriously and we will strengthen democratic deliberation as the way to achieve it. Surely that is a worthy task.

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