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American Communication Journal
Volume 4, Issue 3, Spring 2001

Productive Criticism Then and Now

Robert L. Ivie
Department of Communication and Culture
Indiana University, Bloomington
rivie@indiana.edu

"Productive criticism" is the title of the sixth editorial in a series of nine I wrote while serving as editor of *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* from 1993 through 1995. It is also the name I have adopted since then to identify my evolving attitude toward rhetorical scholarship. It was never meant as a substitute or synonym for Raymie McKerrow's "critical rhetoric" or even Philip Wander's "ideological turn." It doesn't even necessarily lean to the left. Besides, "left" is a relative term (as in, left of what?) within a delimited field of reference (as in, left on what?). Most, if not all, of us are complexes of situated and variable attitudes--attitudes that at least sometimes seem inconsistent or even incompatible with one another. As a metaphor of political direction, then, the single continuum of left to right is too spare to capture the rich texture of rhetorical action. Ideology is fragmented as a function of persuasion and thus cannot be reduced to a static scale from radical left to reactionary right, at least not in a rhetorical universe.

My aim in these editorials was to feature rhetoric as a generative term for social critique, to avoid reducing rhetoric to ideology without losing sight of its ideological work and to bridge the divide between *rhetorica docens* and *rhetorica utens* within a framework of scholarship that engages public issues. The thoroughly rhetorical critic, I want to argue, is a productive scholar who enriches the social imaginary for the purpose of enhancing human relations. Such a critic develops theory as a rhetoric of social relations by drawing on rhetoric as a source of invention. As a perspective on symbolic action, rhetoric is a productive rather than a reductive theory--a set of overlapping heuristics at multiple levels of specificity and generalization for generating speech, especially on matters of civic import and particularly for cultivating democratic culture. While I don't mean to reduce all social criticism to rhetorical criticism, I do think there is a great deal of underutilized potential in thinking about social problems as rhetorical problems and about potential correctives as rhetorical correctives. In this sense, rhetorical critique is a form of scholarship that yields theory as a mode of attitudinizing B theory about how to bridge the human divide.

My view of rhetorical scholarship as a mode of social critique is inspired mostly by my understanding of Kenneth Burke's treatment of literature and rhetoric, within a dramatistic theory of symbolic action, as equipment for living. If there had been a fourth year in my term as *QJS* editor, the tenth editorial might have elaborated on my reading of Burke enough to attenuate frightful images of political barbarians breaching the walls of academia. After all, our field already has appropriated Burke's ideas of dramatism, cluster analysis, identification, symbolic action and more, all to the ends of academic criticism. Invoking his authority should dull the edge of anxiety over conceptualizing rhetorical criticism as a form of social critique. Yet, we aren't accustomed to thinking of Burke as an engaged social critic writing within the academy or, at least, read by academic intellectuals. We are more comfortable with Joseph Gusfield's sociological take on Burke's theory of symbols and society than William Rueckert's normative rendering of Burke's comic corrective. We think of Burke's theory as a way of accounting for rhetorical practice rather than as a way of addressing social problems and improving human relations.

I can't take for granted, therefore, that my interpretation of Burke's dramatistic rhetoric is sufficiently commonplace to warrant my claims for productive criticism without making at least some attempt to explain how he treats academic theorizing as a form of social attitudinizing. Nor do I think Burke is the only rhetorical theorist who can be brought to bear on a project of social critique. Chaim Perelman's *New Rhetoric*, for example, radically rhetoricizes the problem and solution of justice, just as Burke's writing

focuses attention on the rhetorical dynamics of victimage and the construction of comic correctives to promote "social cohesion" (*Rhetoric of Motives*, p. xiv). Nevertheless, placing Burke, per se, within a framework of social critique is an important first step toward articulating an approach to engaged rhetorical criticism that operates well within the genre of scholarship even as it enriches the social imaginary. Rather than reducing criticism to direct political action or dissociating academic criticism from politics, I want to think of a continuum of interlinking genres within a larger democratic culture. Academics are engaged in cultural work that can enrich democratic attitudes significantly even if indirectly. In Rueckert's words, "Burke is surely one of our great democratic critics . . . calling us to intellectual battle, telling us to join him, follow him in the search for knowledge, taking such risks as are necessary" (*Encounters*, 44).

Burke's well known critique of *Mein Kampf* (originally published in *The Southern Review* in the 1930s) illustrates the cultural import of his scholarship by announcing as its goal an inoculation of Americans against the "fascist integration" effected by Hitler's "crude magic." Most importantly, we are called upon to examine how Hitler "made such sinister unifying possible within his own nation" so that "we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America." Thus, we learn about the rhetorical dynamics through which the Jew became the devil figure uniting Germany in its "holy" cause, how the Jew functioned as a medicinal scapegoat to account for the Babel of democratic voices associated with "poverty, prostitution, immorality, coalitions, half-measures, incest . . . death, internationalism, seduction, and anything else of thumbs-down sort." Hitler's perversion of religious appeal, including the symbolic rebirth of a racially purified and superior Aryan nation, revealed the power of the scapegoat mechanism to bastardize genuine desires for unity by deflecting attention away "from the accurate locus of our trouble" while "the factors pressing towards calamity remain." What happened in Nazi Germany might also occur elsewhere, even at home, unless we "find all available ways of making the Hitlerite distortions of religion apparent, in order that politicians of his kind in America be unable to perform a similar swindle" ("Hitler's 'Battle,' 191-92, 195-201, 202-03, 219-20).

Indeed, the problem of the scapegoat in public culture, enacted via victimage rhetoric, is the focal point of Burke's *Attitudes Toward History* (first published in 1937). It is his motivation, as he explains in the book's introduction, for appropriating the poetic categories of tragedy and comedy to a project of social criticism, because "getting along with people is one devil of a difficult task" and "we should all want to get along with people (and do want to)." This is a book about "life in political communities," about the "forming and reforming of congregations," about frames of acceptance and rejection, and about a dramatistically inclined terminology he develops into an analytic instrument for methodically viewing "human antics as a comedy, albeit as a comedy ever on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy."

Burke does not view the problem of human relations from a neutral corner with an objective eye. Instead, his dramatistic theory operates as a program of action: "Action requires programs--programs require vocabulary. To act wisely, in concert, we must use many words. If we use the wrong words, words that divide up the field inadequately, we obey false cues. We must name the friendly or unfriendly functions and relationships in such a way that we are able to do something about them . . . . since the names embody attitudes; and implicit in the attitudes there are the cues of behavior" (*24 Attitudes*, p. 4).

Theorizing is a mode of attitudinizing. The terminologies Burke works up are "attitudinal" terms for confronting the recurring quandaries of human conflict; his "Dictionary of Pivotal Terms" for undertaking "the comic critique of social relationships" names the human condition "from a meditative, or moralizing, or even hortatory point of view" (*Attitudes*, "Introduction," p. 214). Accordingly, the ideal of a comic vocabulary of motives is to produce "humility without humiliation" (p. 344), to overcome the estrangement of alienation by articulating symbolic modes of transcendence, to locate bridging devices that prevent us from being driven into a corner, for example, by deploying strategies of perspective by incongruity, by stealing symbols back and forth, by engaging in rituals of rebirth, and so on.

With this vocabulary and by these means critics promote a comic frame of motives that enables people to observe themselves in a state of maximum consciousness even as they act (p. 171), just as it allows the "poet-plus-critic" to act while observing his or her own acts, to synthesize and analyze perspectives, to take apart and reassemble frames of interpretation in order to "mature" attitudes toward one another (pp. 213-14). Burke's project in social criticism treats collective life as a venture in composition, translation, and revision (p. 173), a project, as Rueckert notes, which seeks to complicate the oversimplifications on which

scapegoating depends by widening, broadening, rounding out, and amplifying frames of acceptance (*Encounters*, p. 119).

Burke's dramatism as a theory of critical engagement that attitudinizes in the service of human relations carries over to his understanding of critical methodology. Just as victimage depends upon oversimplifying a situation and caricaturing the Other, an elaborated account gauges a situation more adequately and therefore with less cause to point the finger of blame falsely (*Philosophy*, p. 7). Thus, the critic charts the rhetor's symbolic equations or associational clusters to determine what goes with what, what versus what, and what becomes what through which symbols of transformation (*Philosophy*, p. 20, 38-39, 69-71). By this means, the critic identifies the rhetor's problematic "strategy for encompassing a situation" dash problematic, that is, because its overly efficient equational structure and skewed dramatic alignments size up the situation with insufficient "accuracy and scope" to prevent victimage rituals (*Philosophy*, pp. 1, 51, 109). Rather than attempt to eliminate symbolic spells, the Burkean critic is charged with attempting "to coach 'good' spells" by widening the frame of reference in which people may act more reasonably and thus become less motivated by symbols of good and evil (*Philosophy*, pp. 119, 188).

Such transformations in the service of social cohesion are the theme of Burke's rhetoric of identification, where identification is compensatory to division (division being the condition in which individuals and groups typically find themselves) and the classical principles of persuasion are put to the task "*of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols*" (*Rhetoric*, pp. 22, 43, Burke's italics). Accordingly, Burke's rhetoric of courtship attends to the many topoi by which the general process of transformation is concretized and localized, especially "the imagery of Life and Death, with its variants of being born, being reborn, dying, killing, and being killed," but also "the imagery of the Upward Way and Downward Way, or of the Crossing and Return, or of Exile and Homecoming, or of a Winding-up and an Unwinding, or of Egressus and Regressus, or of a Movement Inward and a Movement Outward, or of seasonal developments, or of various antitheses, like Day and Night, Warmth and Frigidity, Yes and No, Losing and Finding, Loosing and Binding, etc." (*Rhetoric*, pp. 11-12). Through these and other rhetorical conceptualizations, social critics are better able to discern how to begin bridging the conditions of estrangement and countering conditions of hierarchic psychosis, i.e., to write books (and articles) 3for tolerance and contemplation" and against "the torrents of ill will" (*Rhetoric*, p. xv), to write in the spirit of both/and rather than either/or and thus toward the end of operating under the sign of error (which can be corrected) instead of evil (which must be purged).

The critic's scholarly rhetoric differs from that of the popular political rhetor. Both the critic and the popular rhetor are engaged in articulating strategies for encompassing a situation, but the critic aims to widen a frame where otherwise it would oversimplify the complexities of social life and political problems. Thus, Burke encourages rhetorical critics, who can never be completely "free of subjective interpretations," to use all there is to use, to show by inductive inspection and citation where the symbolic interrelationships exist in the problematic rhetoric that they have selected for critique, to expose their own propositions to examination and discussion by offering supporting evidence, to explain the limits of their critical accounts in order to avoid producing "essentializing strategies" of interpretation, and so on (*Philosophy*, pp. 21, 23, 89). The critic's methodology is a more open strategy for exposing and correcting the popular rhetor's divisive methods (*Philosophy*, p. 130). While there is no formal procedure for choosing the metaphor that guides a critic's corrective chart of a contested terrain, the way in which that metaphor is filled out can be held accountable to key criteria such as its scope, range, relevancy, and accuracy (*Philosophy*, p. 145).

While the scholarly engagement of political culture is not the same as directly practicing popular politics in the public sphere, it does raise the salience and social significance of a critic's work and consequently increases the degree of scrutiny and burden of proof encountered by productive critics. In short, this sense of rhetorical scholarship as productive criticism entails a higher standard of insight and argument than is likely to confront less salient research. Meeting this higher standard may even contribute to the salvation of a field which, suffering from self-imposed isolation, seeks greater impact and more respect for its intellectual labors. Rather than dissipating scholarly energy in direct political action, productive critics can address the problematics of democratic culture thoughtfully and persuasively, enriching the social imaginary from which political actors may develop better strategies for bridging the human divide.

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