



## Criticism, Politics, and Objectivity: Redivivus

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In fencing, a riposte is a swift thrust offered in reply to an opponent's lunge. In the present case, the original lunge was the collective efforts of the authors writing for [Criticism, Politics, and Objectivity](#) in the *American Communication Journal* 4.1; the parry and attempted riposte was given by the authors of [Rhetoric, Politics, and Critique](#) in *ACJ* 4.3. However, for a riposte to be effective, the parry must succeed. In this case, I feel we have witnessed a mal paré, a parry that failed to prevent the original attack from landing. In the paragraphs that follow, I explain why I believe this to be the case.

I confess no surprise when I read the essays in *Rhetoric, Politics, and Critique*. Usually responses are, after all, crafted to provide oppositional points of view. Yet in the retelling of events, the original meaning or purpose is frequently shifted, supplanted, lost, or otherwise changed during the endeavour to highlight the new contributions. I write now after considering the changes the authors of *ACJ* 4.3 have wrought.

The structure of this essay consists of two parts. First, I briefly compare the themes advanced by the authors in *Criticism, Politics, and Objectivity* in *ACJ* 4.1 with the themes used by the authors in *Rhetoric, Politics, and Critique* in *ACJ* 4.3. Second, I specifically address the assumptive nature of politicised criticism.

### ACJ 4.1 vis-a'-vis ACJ 4.3

When I first thought of the special section, *Criticism, Objectivity, and Politics*, I wanted to discuss the gradual movement in our discipline toward an activist criticism. I think the authors of *ACJ* 4.1 did this well. Each offered a specific critique or point of view on this topic, and readers were presented with essays that ranged from general to specific observations concerning how critics ought to perform and envision their task. However, this point was mischaracterised by the guest editor of *Rhetoric, Politics, and Critique* in *ACJ* 4.3.

In comparing the major thrust of *ACJ* 4.1 with that of *ACJ* 4.3, Mark Huglen wrote that "Broadly speaking, the discussion is about criticism that is disinterested science versus strategic criticism for social reform."<sup>1</sup> Simply put, this is wrong. What the authors of *ACJ* 4.1 collectively wrote concerning the practice of rhetorical criticism was a far cry from calling for disinterested science. We instead strove mightily to navigate those critical waters **between** the Scylla of scientific objectivity and the Charybdis of activist criticism. Writing in 1977 on this subject, Ed Black stated:

Methods, then, admit of varying degrees of personality. And criticism, on the whole, is near the indeterminate, contingent, personal end of the methodological scale. In consequence of this placement, it is neither possible nor desirable for criticism to be fixed into a system, for critical techniques to be objectified, for critics to be interchangeable for purposes of [scientific] replication, or for rhetorical criticism to serve as the handmaiden of quasi scientific theory. [The]

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idea is that critical method is too personally expressive to be systematized.<sup>2</sup>

Black's point of view on this subject has changed little since writing the above. In *ACJ* 4.1 he wrote: "what accomplished critic has ever claimed that criticism should only be objective? Criticism is not supposed to be always objective."<sup>3</sup> I certainly followed this line of thinking when I wrote, "When I use the term 'objective,' I do not mean that critics ought to possess or are capable of possessing a scientific detachment from the object of criticism. This would surely produce a sterile criticism devoid of its lifeblood: the critic's intermingled intuition, insight, and personality."<sup>4</sup> Craig A. Smith wrote that "While the objectivity of science is not possible, it is still possible to make a case that is coherent, congruent, and convincing."<sup>5</sup> Jill Taft-Kaufman wrote that "Value judgments underpin social thought. Consequently, those who hide behind unquestioned objectivity create an illusion of the world rather than address the way ideas and events work in it."<sup>6</sup>

Thus the logic we collectively advanced had nothing to do with scientific detachment or certainty, and most certainly does not represent a Cartesian view of the world. It is, rather, a logic of rhetorical probability; we put forth ideas of how to engage in and judge critical work without falling into the trap of relativism or scientific objectivity.

The role of politics within criticism was also addressed by the authors of *ACJ* 4.1 and *ACJ* 4.3. McGee, while agreeing with Black that "politics and criticism are hopelessly entwined," strongly disagreed when Black wrote: "The inhibiting complication is that although the critic's political convictions may merit respect, they are not necessarily going to be any more interesting or intelligent or original than the general run of political convictions."<sup>7</sup> On this point McGee wrote: "I look for a last minute hand-hold to keep me from the fatal leap. In this moment of retreat, Black is saying that 'the critic' he interpellates learns nothing in the process of criticizing; or, more ominously, that what 'the critic' learns has no bearing on politics."<sup>8</sup> For McGee, the critic ought to take the next step and do what activist critics today do: "That which critics do today is proactive, openly political in its acknowledgment of its bias and its agenda to produce practical theories of culture and of social relations (including political relations)."<sup>9</sup> Or, in Ivie's words, "criticism, as a specific performance of general rhetorical knowledge, yields a form of scholarship that obtains social relevance by strategically reconstructing the interpretive design of civic discourse in order to diminish, bolster, or redirect its significance. [Criticism] is a form of advocacy grounded in the language of a particular rhetorical situation. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

Yet the problem remains that activist critics do not necessarily **learn** anything new. As partisan activists, they bring their ideological convictions to the table; I believe these convictions, more often than not, **determine** the results of their criticism. As Ivie wrote: rhetorical criticism should produce "a detailed and partisan critique. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

These convictions function as *apriori* truths that inform the activist critic's analysis. Thus the results are often preordained (and in my view, often conveniently support the activist critic's political point of view). With this in mind, I think Black is dead on when he wrote that although the "critic's political convictions may merit respect, they are not necessarily going to be any more interesting or intelligent or original than the general run of political convictions."<sup>12</sup> Expanding on this point, Black said of criticism: "The critic's procedures are, when at their best, original; they grow ad hoc from the critic's engagement with the [rhetorical] artifact."<sup>13</sup>

The type of open activist criticism I have seen and envision continuing is every bit as sterile as an essay that imposes Kenneth Burke's notion of the Pentad upon a rhetorical artifact: the critic operating in this mode **will find** an Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose. Similarly, activist critics will find the "oppressive" structures of power they set out to find; their political convictions will be upheld and corroborated through their "critical" analysis.

I believe the authors of *ACJ* 4.1 would generally agree with me when I say that by temporarily putting one's political ideology aside, one may better interact with the rhetorical artifact under consideration, **since one will not be tainting that artifact with one's political convictions**. As Smith wrote, "In the academic

marketplace, critics should state their case and then prove it, as opposed to offering up front-loaded theory and then supporting it with selective readings."<sup>14</sup> Smith ends his essay by stressing the product of disinterested or objective scholarship: "we ought to confine ourselves to solid argumentation inclusive of valid arguments built on sufficient and high quality evidence produced from close readings and masterings of context."<sup>15</sup>

I am inclined to believe that McGee plays the iconoclast when he so readily attacks the traditional notion of "disinterested" criticism, saying that being a disinterested critic was fine for Black's day but not for our own. McGee takes particular umbrage at Black's admonition that critics should "shut up about politics" unless they have something fresh to say: "If the critic does that, then the political convictions of the critic will be presuppositional. That is, the critic will observe, judge and argue from some political convictions rather than to them. The critic's politics will be implicit rather than explicit. Even so, the contours of the critic's political convictions will be clear enough from the criticism."<sup>16</sup> In this sense, a critic's politics are seen as having been assimilated into the critic's worldview in the same way we assimilate other points of view that make up our personalities. It is simply part of who we are, not the torch that lights our way in the world.

McGee feels that Black's statement acts as a confession, that Black actually admits "to an academic politics of deception, dissimulation, and fundamental dishonesty."<sup>17</sup> McGee suggested that, "When interpellating 'the critic' and 'criticism,' the first thing a rhetorician should do is to identify her political orientation. Her syllabus should contain a paragraph describing the trajectory of her course. Her book should have a Chapter that aligns her politics with that politics practiced in the workaday world by political parties competing for control of the State. She must be fair, describing the politics of those who disagree with her in a light that leans more toward portraiture than caricature. I make these claims from the sure conviction that you cannot organize data into useful knowledge if you start with the intention to be slippery, evasive, 'implicit rather than explicit.' "<sup>18</sup>

In McGee's eyes, Black has confessed to an academic politics of deception, solely because he views political passions as one aspect of a critic's personality (implicit) instead of embracing those political passions as *raison d'être* of criticism. Yet in my mind, it is the activist critics who practice deception, dissimulation, and fundamental dishonesty. They deceive when they advance political activism as "disinterested" rhetorical criticism. And even if these critics were to announce their political positions, they still deceive since they claim as scholarship their *a priori* beliefs that ground their partisan activism. They dissimulate in the very way Ivie describes: "productive criticism strategically reconstructs the interpretive design of speech (and other forms of symbolic action) in order to diminish, bolster, or redirect its significance."<sup>19</sup> And they are dishonest since when confronted with evidence to the contrary of their political beliefs they ignore or change the results. For example, McGee writes: "Kuypers' plaint leads to a simple judgment about the acceptability of 'conservatives' who desire one day to have an intellectual impulse."<sup>20</sup> Although I am uncertain if he refers to past or future contributions, either way he actively chooses to ignore either all of conservative intellectual history since the publication of Edmond Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* or the very real dearth of any such work in our own journals.<sup>21</sup>

McGee's call for the critic to announce his politics simply does not obtain. We do not read our left-leaning activist colleagues beginning their work with "I'm a liberal Democrat feminist scholar/activist who believes in using my position as critic and professor in politically active ways in my teaching, research, and service. I will grade the work of my students based on its compatibility with my political ideology; I will critique the work of my colleagues based on this same ideology; and I will advance this ideology in my scholarship." Although McGee calls for this, Cloud implies it is the norm, and Ivie lights the way, it is a project bound to fail. The public that pays the salaries of those of us at public institutions will not be so supportive if we openly declare our work to be partisan political activism. I envision many activist critics choosing to operate on the cusp, denying that the results of their criticism are in any way preordained by the methods and political beliefs they impose upon unsuspecting rhetorical artifacts. I imagine some keeping their politics just below the surface--deceiving, dissimulating, and being dishonest--all because they fear leaving the academy to take their chances in the ruff and tumble world of real politics.

### On the Political Nature of Criticism

Huglen and Cloud would have the point of view I presented in my original essay, "Must We All be Political Activists?," categorised as extreme. Cloud wrote that I replicated "the paranoid neo-McCarthyist arguments of the anti-political-correctness movement. . . ." <sup>22</sup> Huglen also positions my arguments as extreme, and then implies that the Ivian perspective I critiqued is more in keeping with mainstream rhetorical thought. McGee simply stated that I "joined a minority of disgruntled rhetorical scholars. . . ." <sup>23</sup> For any of these positions to be credible, one must first agree with their **assumptions** that the point of view I expressed in *ACJ* 4.1 is extreme. Yet the very assumptions these authors use to label objective criticism as extreme are unproven, nor do they flow from my essay.

I will show how this works, beginning in a small way with an item in Huglen's essay: he called me "James." Innocent enough on the surface, but my given name is Jim. Nowhere in my published works am I called James, always Jim. That is the name on my birth certificate. Even in the essay to which Huglen responds one finds Jim, not James. Yet Huglen cited that very article using James. So why does Huglen so easily call me by another's name? Because his assumptions about that name (Jim really means James) overpowered the actual existence of the name (Jim means Jim). In short, he **imposed** his beliefs (all Jims must be James) on the rhetorical artifact--Jim--instead of allowing it to first speak for itself.

A more substantive example of this assumptive process that objective or disinterested criticism mitigates against occurs in Cloud's essay. She wrote, Kuypers's arguments "describe an (unfortunately, for me) imaginary universe in which leftists are taking over the academy and its attendant outlets for publication. In my view, there is no evidence to support a claim that we are on the verge of a left political dictatorship in our field or anywhere else in the academy." <sup>24</sup> Cloud's assumptions about the political composition of the academy allows her to ignore the numerous examples I provided in my original essay of the actions of the left in higher education and our discipline. <sup>25</sup> Moreover, these assumptions disallow checking for contrary information.

With a little leg work, however, one may easily find more evidence that supports my contention of a left of center hegemony on college campuses. For example, in 1998 *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published "Attitudes and Activities of Faculty Members." <sup>26</sup> Self descriptions of faculty members reveal a distinct difference from Cloud's claim relayed above. Specifically at public universities, 6.4 percent declare themselves "far left"; 44.3 percent declare themselves "liberal"; 35 percent declare themselves "moderate"; 13.4 percent declare themselves "conservative"; and only 0.3 percent declare themselves "far right." Conservative and moderate descriptions decrease when one looks at private Universities. <sup>27</sup> Compare this with the self-descriptions of Americans at large: roughly 17.4 percent liberal, 36.8 percent moderate, and 43.4 percent conservative. <sup>28</sup>

I believe the examples I provided in my original essay, in conjunction with the self descriptions above, are indicative of the left-wing hegemony in our discipline and, I believe, higher education in general. One can also see this when reviewing voter registration of faculty. For example, "the *Cornell Review* analyzed public voter registration records of professors at Cornell and several other universities, and the results clearly prove the left-wing supremacy of the faculty. In total, registered Democrats out-poll registered Republicans 171 to 7 in seven of the larger and more popular liberal arts departments at Cornell: History, Government, English, African Studies, Women's Studies, Economics, Psychology, Anthropology, and Sociology." <sup>29</sup>

It's no different at Dartmouth, which is considered by many to be the most conservative of the Ivy League schools. In 1996, student reporters investigated

only the departments of English, Government, History, Philosophy and Religion, on the grounds that the politics of physicists and chemists don't really affect their teaching. Transforming the figures into percentages, we learn that 62 percent of those who teach economics are registered as Democrats and 6 percent as Republicans (others listed themselves as independents). In English, 78 percent are Democrats, 6 percent Republicans. In Government, 90 percent Democrats, zero percent Republicans. History? Eighty-three percent Democrats, zero percent Republicans. Religion: 83 percent Democrats, zero Republicans. And, in the mother of learning, philosophy,

we have 100 per cent Democrats.<sup>30</sup>

Some of you may be thinking that party affiliation does not reflect political action. Well, I contest that assumption for academics. Let us look at the 1996 elections in Hanover, NH where numerous Dartmouth faculty and administrators live: Republicans won every race district wide, except that for Governor. However, if the Township of Hanover were to have decided all of the races, then Democrats would have won every single race by a **wide margin**--over 2 to 1. These results are not uncommon, and generally reflected the results of the 1998 and 2000 elections here as well.

Knowing the above is but one example, I will lightly contend that the figures on faculty voting are similar at the overwhelming majority of Universities across America. I spend the extra time on this because I think it time we face up to the **fact** that despite protests to the contrary, there is a diversity problem in higher education when it comes to political representation. Far too often activist critics ignore the political climate in our Universities, a climate that benefits their political actions and utterances. As Hoyt Hopewell Hudson wrote, "So far as this is true, it is a charge of illiberality against these teachers, since like illiberal people in general they are ignoring facts, or, if they recognize the facts, are refusing to carry out the processes of thinking which the facts call for."<sup>31</sup>

By strongly implying that the position taken in my essay was replicating that of "the paranoid neo-McCarthyist arguments of the anti-political-correctness movement," Cloud attempts to push that position to an extreme--guilt by association. But what proof is offered? What examples are given? None, but her assertion exists, and is another part of the tactic of making one's interlocutor's criticism seem extreme and thus one's own seem the norm.

I found this statement by Huglen the most outlandish:

in the present case of polarization and the charge by Kuypers of the illegitimacy of Ivie's perspective as political activism, Kuypers doesn't really reveal or show others just what the other more traditional perspective is in practice, or what he is standing for and promoting in what we might say are "highly political" actions themselves. Polar-rejective identification is a value-weighted strategy for those working from the extreme positions. Near the end of his essay, in so many words Kuypers "challenges" critics of the Iviean perspective to "prove assumptions," and provide "guidelines" along with a mechanism for "accessing responsibility." Interestingly, if we look to the Rhetoric and Aristotle's strategy of applying what was said back against the other, we see that the onus of proving assumptions is, paradoxically, on Kuypers, and not Ivie. Why? Because, Ivie's perspective and assumptive framework is already explicit, while in contrast Kuypers alludes to something else that is not wholly known in terms of proving assumptions, the provision of providing guidelines for his own criticism, or offering any mechanism for accessing responsibility for his own commentary.<sup>32</sup>

When I set out to write my original essay I wrote realising I represented a traditional notion of criticism as opposed to an activist mode. I am not ashamed of this, and I accept full responsibility for suggesting that we accept responsibility for our criticism instead of imposing our ideology upon unsuspecting rhetorical artifacts . A traditional mode of criticism espouses a traditional notion of objectivity which is just that: traditional, and importantly, that which is in common use--the status quo. Even Dana Cloud recognised this when she wrote in 1994:

[I address] the significant and growing minority of rhetorical scholars- Marxists, feminists, postmodernists, and other critics of the prevailing social order--who came to rhetorical studies out of the conviction that rhetoric provides a rich set of analytical and explanatory tools for social critique. [These critics believe the] study of rhetoric . . . is vital to the projects of critique and social change.<sup>33</sup>

Not too long ago Cloud believed activist critics to be in the minority, albeit arguably a growing one. I believe this to be the case today as well. The position I presented in my original essay invoked the status



quo. As such, the burden of proof falls upon those wishing to affirm a change in the status quo--Ivie, McGee, Cloud, and Huglen. Unfortunately for these authors, a prima facie case requires more than the mere assertion that their desire for change actually necessitates the change. And, even if by some chance activist critics should ascend to the majority, the public expectation of disinterestedness in our work still obtains, thus forcing us to deal with the status quo of public expectation.

Huglen, after erroneously categorising my position as extreme, asks that I provide examples of what I envision as rhetorical criticism. I am perplexed by this request since I outlined clearly my definition of "objective" criticism in my original essay. My mistake might have been in placing the definition in an endnote and not in the text where it would be more readily noticed. So here it is in full:

When I use the term "objective," I do not mean that critics ought to possess or are capable of possessing a scientific detachment from the object of criticism. This would surely produce a sterile criticism devoid of its lifeblood: the critic's intermingled intuition, insight, and personality. What I am suggesting is that the critic may approach the artifact under consideration with a fair and open mind. In this sense the critic sets aside personal politics or ideological "truths" and approaches the artifact with a sense of curiosity. The artifact under consideration ought not to be altered to fit the prejudgments of the critic, but be allowed to voice its inner workings to the world. The work of the critic is to make certain that this voice is intelligible to and approachable by the public.

This in no way detracts from the critic bringing to bear an individual stamp upon the criticism produced. Nor is it the antiseptic application of a method upon an unsuspecting rhetorical artifact. What it does suggest is that the critic must learn how to appreciate the inner workings of a text, even if personally the critic finds that text to be repugnant, or wishes it to be other than it is. In this sense, the critic is being "objective," or disinterested, when approaching and describing a text.

Judgments may certainly be made, and appreciation or disdain expressed, but they must be made after two conditions are met: one, the fair minded description of the inner workings of the artifact have been presented for the world to see; and two, the standards of judgments used by the critic are provided for all to see. In this way readers may themselves judge whether or not the critic imposed his ideology upon the artifact.<sup>34</sup>

If this position paints me as an extremist, then I gladly embrace the label. But from my observations, I think this position is more in keeping with the majority of critics in our discipline, and most certainly in keeping with a more traditional notion of criticism.

McGee also tries to place my position in the extremist camp by saying that I am importing to speech the culture wars found within English departments. I categorically reject this analogy. Speech is not English, and I have argued in *Twentieth-Century Roots of Rhetorical Studies* that the discipline of speech has followed a very different tradition of criticism.<sup>35</sup> Even the way we define the term rhetoric differentiates us. However, those scholars following Ivie and McGee have closer kith and kin with rhetoric as viewed in English departments than they do with rhetoric as traditionally viewed in speech. This is seen with McGee's controversial claim that the "purpose of rhetorical study is now social and cultural criticism. . . ."<sup>36</sup> Certainly Ivie made this the case at Indiana once he assumed leadership of the Department of Communication, now the *Department of Communication and Culture*. Certainly this was the case at the *Department of Communication Studies* at the University of Iowa when I was there in the early 1990s. But when I withdrew from Iowa, rejecting activist criticism, I found no lack of good schools that did not follow Iowa and now Indiana.

The point here is that by labeling the position expressed in my essay as extreme, McGee and Huglen are free to make assumptions about that position that are simply untrue. For example, Huglen embraces Ivie's notion of allowing a critic to operate "by strategically reconstructing the interpretive design of civic discourse in order to diminish, bolster, or redirect its significance" thereby yielding "a form of scholarship that obtains social relevance. . . ."<sup>37</sup> In this instance, by painting the position I expressed as extreme and guided by the principles in Ivie's perspective, Huglen redirects the significance of my words, and in the

process, misquotes me:

Kuypers envisions those accepting Ivie's perspective as a ". . . type of Boolean Joker . . .," and finds that "Too often political partisanship in the academy turns into urban-liberal agitation-propaganda." Later in the essay when favoring a form of appreciative criticism over the ideological perspective, Kuypers explains that, "The graceful beauty inherent in appreciation and understanding will be exchanged for the hard marching, rhythmically thumping black boots of critical theory." To me these assertions reveal deep seated tensions, divisions, and hostile attitudes towards what many critics consider legitimate. Kuypers' attitude seems to be that the new perspective is so extreme and illegitimate in comparison with his own view of criticism that disrespectful language, i.e., "Boolean Joker," is fair game to characterize people who differ from him.

As a more traditional critic, I eschew personal name calling, although I am rather fond of labeling actions. In this vein I wrote: "I envision a critic embracing this perspective [Ivie's] to be a type of Boalian Joker running amok in and between the academy and society, the formal and informal, knowing no boundaries, no ethics save change, no control or direction save momentary and vague ideological commitments."<sup>38</sup> I was referring to the work of Augusto Boal (not "Bool," as Huglen wrote), author of *The Theatre of the Oppressed*.<sup>39</sup> Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed in the decades of the 50's and 60's. His concern was with ways of transforming theatre from a monologue to a dialogue between the stage and the audience. Boal believes that when dialogue is replaced with monologue, we see oppression on the rise. He uses theatre to help oppressed peoples engage in dialogue with those who oppress them by actively becoming involved in the production of the play.

My use of Boal's notion of the Joker was a specific reference to this theoretical and practical work. Thus I offered an ironic theoretical positioning: those who embrace Ivie's perspective will act as a Boalian Joker, but not as Boal envisioned it. Therein lies the irony. While they seek to engage in dialogue and free us from what they see as oppressive societal structures of power, they actually force their own transformative practice onto their audience, thus imposing their monologue in place of what traditional critics feel should be a dialogue.<sup>40</sup>

Huglen's operating assumptions concerning my discourse (it is extreme), coupled with a loose embrace of Ivie's perspective, allowed him to make a generalisation concerning my discourse: it is extreme; extremists call names; Kuypers was calling those who use Ivie's perspective names. Once again, Huglen's prior assumptions concerning the rhetorical artifact were not held in check, and thus silenced that artifact from speaking with its own voice.

### **Toward Moving Along**

My original essay simply identified the uncritical assumptions of those wishing to be activist critics (most notably those who would use Ivie's perspective). I see a red sky on this academic dawn of the new century, so I asked that those wishing to be activist critics take three simple steps, steps that I again ask them to take:

First, prove your assumptions; or, at a minimum, show how such criticism will enhance and advance our discipline as a whole, and thus move beyond assuaging the political appetites of a handful of critics and disciplinary leaders. Second, provide guidelines for the choice of topics, methods, and judgments rendered so that academic freedom will not be constrained by any one "correct" political slant. This is to say, protect the rights of those who might speak in political opposition to your own ideological point of view. Three, provide a mechanism for accessing the critic's responsibility, both within the academy and without.<sup>41</sup>

Not one of the *ACJ* 4.3 authors addressed these fundamental issues, although Ivie did take a stab at defining how judgments might be made.<sup>42</sup> Most notably, however, the issue of accepting responsibility for changes enacted by activist criticism has been pointedly ignored by left-leaning activist critics.<sup>43</sup> Asking for satisfaction on these important issues is in no way extreme. I have only asked that the knowledge that our

left-leaning, politically active critics produce is not preconceived from their political ideology, and that it may be used by all--liberal, moderate, conservative.

If we are to flourish as a discipline, we must realise that our purpose is not to change the societal status quo. Rather, we should produce and distribute knowledge that the public may use to change or strengthen the status quo. This is a major point of departure between a notion of disinterested criticism and advocacy based criticism. For example, Cloud stated that: "The most significant difference between conscious political critique and what Jim Kuypers (2000) calls 'independent criticism' is that criticism that shuns overt politics is either ignorant of or masking its own investments in the status quo. Despite Kuypers' claim to the contrary, 'independent criticism' is quite often the affirmation of the status quo disguised as neutrality."<sup>44</sup> In my view, the problem is not that more traditional means and modes of criticism reifies the status quo. Generally speaking, this criticism neither confirms nor confutes; it simply provides insight and understanding for all to use or not, without directly, politically, **challenging** the status quo. The problem for political activist academic critics is that more traditional criticism does not actively challenge and seek to change the status quo, and that for them is a crime. For in the minds of activist critics, the status quo must be changed, with movement ever towards their elusive El Dorado.

I suggest you try this experiment. Being as neutral as possible, think of the last time you read in our journals any such right leaning criticism. Next think to the last time you noted such criticism, but from a left leaning point of view. The incongruity is readily apparent, and thus I smile when I read Cloud's summation to her essay: "Much less can we fault contemporary ideology critics who, in making their investments and interests explicit, refuse the mask of neutrality in favor of an ethics of open advocacy. We expect those who disagree with us in our projects of advocacy to bear the same burden of political openness."<sup>45</sup> This begs credulity, for the great unspoken truth in our discipline is that studies that so much as suggest that conservatives might be right will be denied access to our journals. Some of our scholars shun allowing conservatives even to use the fruits of our scholarship.<sup>46</sup>

Activist criticism, by its very activist nature, is not fair criticism--it is partisan; it takes sides. A more traditional notion of objective criticism strives to be fair; it strives to produce information that open minded disputants can employ. Time for a reality check. Think of an imaginary partisan activist scholar (with opposite politics than you hold dear) and of an imaginary scholar who strives to be objective. Next ask yourself the following questions: who would you want grading your papers or class participation? Who would you wish to have on your promotion or tenure review committee? Who would you want reviewing your essays for journal publications? Who would you want as editor of a journal to which you have submitted your work? Who would you want providing scholarly "information" for you to use? I think it safe to say the overwhelming majority of those reading this essay would choose the objective scholar.<sup>47</sup>

To sum the convictions expressed here, I ask that those activist critics among us be honest enough to engage their criticism with the following in mind: first, attempt to be objective by keeping your partisan political beliefs suspended long enough to engage the artifact on its own terms. Allow its voice to speak before you **impose** your own. Second, allow your judgments on the artifact to flow from the method used, not from your *a priori* ideological truths. This will allow for an honest engagement with the artifact. Third, take responsibility for the criticism presented. Reflexivity and perpetual change are not enough.

Just because one does not actively challenge the status quo, does not mean one by default embraces it. By offering understanding and insight, one empowers others to decide whether to embrace or reject. I merely suggest that our role as academic critics is to provide information for disputants to use. The point is not to announce one's political passions, but to force those passions to take a back seat until a fair presentation of the artifact under consideration is made. The public expects us to produce scholarship, not partisan political action disguised as scholarship. As I have said before, we should be professors, not social activists.

## Notes

1. Mark Huglen, "Plots of Ironic Entanglement and Legitimacy," *American Communication Journal* 4.3 (May 2001) <http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol4/iss3/special/huglen.htm>.



2.Edwin Black, "Author's Forward," *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) xi, x.

3.Edwin Black, "On Objectivity and Politics in Criticism" *American Communication Journal* 4.1 (2000) <http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol4/iss1/special/black.htm>.

4. Jim A. Kuypers, "Must We All Be Political Activists?" *American Communication Journal* 4.1 (2000) <http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol4/iss1/special/kuypers.htm>.

5.Craig R. Smith, "Criticism of Political Rhetoric and Disciplinary Integrity," *American Communication Journal* 4.1 (2000) <http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol4/iss1/special/kuypers.htm>.

6.Jill Taft-Kaufman, "Critical Claims, Critical Functions: Autoethnography and Postscholarship," *American Communication Journal* 4.1 (2000) <http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol4/iss1/special/taft.htm>.

7.Black, "On Objectivity"

8.Michael Calvin McGee, "On Objectivity and Politics in Rhetoric," *American Communication Journal* 4.3 (2001) <http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol4/iss3/special/mcgee.htm>.

9.McGee

10.Robert L. Ivie, "The Social Relevance of Rhetorical Scholarship ," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81.2 (1994).

11.Robert L. Ivie, "A Question of Significance," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80.4 (1994).

12.Black, "On Objectivity"

13.Black, "On Objectivity"

14.Smith

15.Smith

16.Black, "On Objectivity"

17.McGee

18.McGee

19.Robert L. Ivie, "Productive Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81.1 (1995).

20.McGee

21.Russell Kirk provides a nice summation of this in *The Conservative Mind From Burke to Elliot* 7 ed. (Washington: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1999). See too, George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996). For a rich selection of Conservative intellectual essays see George A. Panichas, ed., *Modern Age: The First*

*Twenty-Five Years* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1988).

22.Dana L. Cloud, "The Affirmative Masquerade," *American Communication Journal* 4.3 (2001)  
<http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol4/iss3/special/cloud.htm>.

23.McGee

24.Cloud

25.See specifically the examples contain in the conclusion of "Must We All Be Political Activists?"

26. "Attitudes and Activities of Full-Time Faculty Members, 1995-1996," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (28 August 1998): 32.

27."Attitudes and Activities" 32.

28.Harris Poll, study no. 951101, (with 2.% undecided). Harris has been asking the question of political leaning for numerous decades. The numbers are fairly consistent (within a few percentages), but out of 20 polls I looked at between the years 1990 and 1995, I never saw liberal self descriptions reach the 20% mark.

29.John Lee, *Campus*, (Spring 1996): 10-11.

30.William F. Buckley, *Valley News* 1996.

31.Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, *Educating Liberally* (Stanford University, California: Stanford University Press, 1945) 83

32.Huglen

33.Dana Cloud, "The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Communication* 58.3 (1994): 141-163. The few lines I cite here in no way represent the thrust of this extremely well written and well thought out essay. Those interested in better understanding Critical Rhetoric should put this essay on their reading list.

34.Kuypers

35.For an detailed analysis of this tradition see: Jim A. Kuypers and Andrew King, eds. *Twentieth-Century Roots of Rhetorical Studies*. Jim A. Kuypers and Andrew King, eds. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).  
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~speech/roots.html>. Specifically see the chapters "Our Roots are Strong and Deep," "Everett Lee Hunt," and "Hoyt Hopewell Hudson."

36.McGee

37.Robert L. Ivie, "Social Relevance"

38.Kuypers, "Must We All be Political Activists?"

39.Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. 1st TCG ed. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985, c1979.)

40. For an outstanding explanation of the Joker system, see Ruth Lauri on Bowman, " 'Joking' with the Classics: Using Boal's Joker System in the Performance Classroom," *Theatre Topics* 7.2 (1997): 139-151. Available online at [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theatre\\_topics/v007/7.2bowman.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theatre_topics/v007/7.2bowman.html)

41. Kuypers, "Must We All be Political Activists?"

42. Specifically Ivie wrote, "The critic's methodology is a more open strategy for **exposing and correcting** the popular rhetor's divisive methods. . . . 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. . . (Ivie, "Productive Criticism Then and Now," *American Communication Journal* 4.3 (2001), emphasis mine. Note, however, that the activist bent is still supreme. The critic must "expose and correct," thus taking sides and producing work that benefits their particular partisan point of view.

43. I have noted this trend for some time. I specifically addressed this issue in my essay, "Doxa and a Realistic Prudence for a Critical Rhetoric," *Communication Quarterly* 44.4 (1996): 452-462. I know of no critic to date that has responded to the challenge set forth in this essay.

44. Cloud, "The Affirmative Masquerade"

45. Cloud, "The Affirmative Masquerade"

46. This includes well respected scholars such as Carol Jablonski, who wrote in a CRTNET post that: "I am wondering if any other house hold received a mailing this week from the Republican National Party citing Dean of the Annenberg School Kathleen Hall Jamieson-on Vice President Gore's "pattern of hyperbole"? . . . I should note that the mailing was addressed to my husband. We are both registered Democrats. He has received mailings from both the Florida and the National Republican Party citing newspaper editorials etc. questioning Gore's character. I have not. I found myself, partisan that I am and shall always be, quite annoyed at our "public scholarship" being used in this way and wonder if any other rhetorical critics on the list have found themselves quoted in a similar way-or have similar reactions to Jamieson being quoted by the RNP?" CRTNET News, "Disc: The politics of disaffection - #5531," (14 November 2000) [crtnet@natcom.org](mailto:crtnet@natcom.org).

47. In the "Affirmative Masquerade" Cloud does address the idea of gate-keepers imposing their beliefs on those trying to be published: "If I were an intellectual gatekeeper (though more often I am held at the gates), I would not seek to impose my own methods of critical thought on others." I think Cloud is an exceptional scholar who tries to be fair-minded; I believe her when she writes this. And yet, the words that follow her statement give me great pause: "However, I might expect all scholars to be rigorous in exploring whose interests are being described, evaluated, re-circulated, and/or reinforced in their work. This **imperative** arises from awareness that all criticism takes up and re-circulates texts that the critics regards as significant in some way" (emphasis mine). Thus Cloud finds it imperative that critics adopt an active political stance in their work. This is, in my view, imposing a particular methodological emphasis to the critic's work.

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