



An Historical Materialist Theory of Rhetoric

James Arnt Aune

Texas A & M University

**Current
Issue**

Archives

**Editorial
Info**

Search

Interact

Printer-friendly [PDF version](#)

In his first important essay, “In Search of ‘the People’: A Rhetorical Alternative,” Michael Calvin McGee contended, “Though concerned almost exclusively with public, social life, students of rhetoric have not been much involved with the topics of social theory.” At the end of that essay he called for rhetorical scholars “to participate in the serious Hegelian and Marxist dialogues of the previous two centuries which have so greatly affected life in our time.”

[copyright](#) 2003, ACJ

Written at a time when rhetorical theory and public address studies appeared to be in decline, McGee’s work stimulated some of the most important developments in the field: 1) the development of more theoretically informed studies of political oratory and other forms of public communication, 2) the development of “macro” approaches to the study of political discourse over time, 3) interdisciplinary interest in rhetoric across the human sciences, particularly in political science, economics, and sociology, 4) the rise of critical-humanistic studies of “mass” media, and, finally, 5) the legitimization of politically-engaged scholarship on the left.

But for a number of reasons—the largely uncritical adoption of poststructuralism by American scholars, the prestige of Foucault’s rejection of Marxism and his anarcho-libertarian refusal to engage in conventional politics, and the postmodern lack of interest in history—McGee’s call for a serious engagement of Hegel and Marx fell largely on deaf ears. The essay that follows is my attempt to describe a historical materialist theory of rhetoric. Every aspect of this work was born in conversations and knock-down arguments with McGee, most notably in the fall of 1981 at the University of Virginia and in the summer of 1986 at the University of Iowa.

As McGee saw clearly, to affirm the possibility of rhetorical studies is to critique a distinct splitting of cultural visions characteristic of both modernity and postmodernity. The split is between a scientific or technological worldview

reluctant to engage questions of ethics and value and a romantic worldview in which the emphasis on individual self-expression seems to undercut the possibility of rational public speech. To talk about rhetoric means to preserve the memory of historical moments when, as Terry Eagleton puts it,

the three great questions of philosophy--what can we know? what ought we to do? what do we find attractive?--were not as yet fully distinguishable from one another. A society, that is to say, where the three mighty regions of the cognitive, the ethico-political, and the libidinal-aesthetic were still to a large extent intermeshed.

A historical materialist theory of rhetoric, however, first must recognize that so-called “decline” of rhetoric was the product of changes in the mode of production. McGee’s often-misunderstood tirades against the legacy of “dead Greeks” must be set squarely in the context of economic and technological change. New communication technologies (first print, and later broadcasting) decreased the costs of information as well as the cultural prestige of the orator. Capitalism increased upward mobility and eroded the culture of deference on which traditional oratory depended. The classical tradition, at its best, asked its audiences to move from being subjects to being citizens. But liberalism inevitably allowed the market to trump democratic participation. A practical and scholarly understanding of the dynamics of citizenship and political leadership in modern democracies and dictatorships would require a materialist understanding of how discourse functions as power. A materialist theory of rhetoric, McGee contended, needs to engage the concept of “ideology.”

The purpose of this essay is to develop a rhetorical theory of ideology that can provide a unifying paradigm for the analysis of public address, rhetorical theory, and communication technology. I will first discuss the concept of ideology in classical Marxism, and the role of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony in resolving some problems in the classical concept. I will then propose a model of rhetoric in terms of its role in mediating structure and action.

Marx and Engels on Ideology

In the classical Marxist sense, ideology is false or deluded speech about the world and the human beings who inhabit it. Marx’s great contribution to the social sciences is that he is not content to show that mistaken speech is false logically or referentially. He also wishes to explain how that mistaken speech came about. As Jon Elster writes, false speech can be explained either in terms of a speaker’s position or interest. A position-explanation locates false speech in the cognitive errors a speaker makes because of an inability to see the whole of a phenomenon. If

I falsely state that the Sun moves around the Earth, it is because I have not been educated to move out of my limited position of observation. If I believe that all women on welfare are African-American, have 10.5 children, and living high off our tax dollars, I am mistaken because of where I live and how I have been educated.

The first discussion of ideology in Marx and Engels uses an optical metaphor to illustrate positional distortions:

If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.

Ideology also emerges from one's social position: "Everyone believes his craft to be the true one. Illusions regarding the connection between their craft and reality are the more likely to be cherished by them because of the very nature of the craft." Cognitive failure can be caused by the self-interest, wishful thinking, and one-sided training associated with a particular occupation. In fact, most of Marx and Engels' critique of ideology was directed against the bourgeois economists first and against self-styled radical academics second, neither of whom recognized the limitations of their social position.

A final form of position-explanation is cognitive failure traceable to needs to compensate for a miserable reality. The indictment of religion as the "opium of the people" falls into this category. False religious speech occurs as the result of cognitive failure reinforced by the internal need for solace in a "heartless world." At times, however, Marx and Engels used a different notion of ideology--interest-explanation--in which ideologies express transparently a person's economic or occupational interests:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it.

This passage is a major source of problems for Marxism. First, as Elster argues, it does not explain how the ideas of the ruling class get to be the ruling ideas. Second, it fails to explain how oppositional ideas get heard at all. Third, it makes "ideas"

simply conduits of interests, and not themselves complex sites of struggle for meaning. Marxism's failure to develop an adequate theory of persuasion and political leadership hampered a full understanding of ideology.

The development of cultural studies has largely depended on beating up on the straw figure of interest-explanation. While interest-explanation is only of limited value in interpreting cultural objects, from Impressionist painting to popular music, it is virtually impossible to make sense of current political and economic trends without the concept of interest-explanation. Writers from social-democratic countries such as Norway or Great Britain have a tendency to downplay the notion of interest-explanation. In the United States the relationship between wealth and political power is often much more nakedly displayed. One of the most important studies published recently on the Left is the report, "Moving a Public Policy Agenda: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations," published by the National Center for Responsive Philanthropy in July 1997.

Twelve foundations, including the Olin and Scaife foundations, contributed \$210 million from 1994 to 1997 alone to do the following things:

- 1) Create conservative academic programs: the University of Chicago, Harvard, George Mason, Yale, and Claremont McKenna have been the top recipients.
- 2) Support regional and Washington-based think tanks who coordinate their policy agendas. Most recently, the think tanks have been promoting a unified message about educational vouchers and about turning over welfare programs to inner-city churches.
- 3) Pay "public intellectuals." Dinesh D'Souza received a fellowship of \$483,023 through the American Enterprise Institute, and Robert Bork \$459,777 through the Heritage Foundation.
- 4) Pay students to take classes in law and economics, courses which inevitably promote a party line on the role of markets in solving all social problems.

As I have argued elsewhere, this systematic promotion of "economic correctness" has not received very much press coverage, especially compared with the carefully orchestrated campaign against political correctness, funded by the same foundations.

"Ideology," then, from a historical materialist standpoint takes the form of social fallacies: limited social perspective, "occupational psychosis," intellectual prostitution, and superstition. A clarification of how ideologies develop was provided by the Italian writer, Antonio Gramsci.

Gramsci on Hegemony

Gramsci's first insight was to recognize that the Revolution in the West would not occur through a war of movement, or frontal attack, as in Czarist Russia. Rather, it would occur through a war of position, or trench warfare, in which intellectuals would play a different role than in Lenin's vanguard party. Gramsci's Prison Notebooks center on the problem of the political function of intellectuals. All people have a philosophic instinct, but this instinct is better developed among intellectuals than others. The problem with intellectuals, however, as Gramsci writes, is that they know but do not always understand and, in particular, do not always feel. In contrast, the "popular element 'feels' but does not always know or understand."

Intellectuals may be divided into two groups: organic intellectuals, who are needed by any new class seeking to develop a new social order; and traditional intellectuals, who are tied to an earlier historical period. Both groups of intellectuals help construct a cultural-social unity ("hegemony") that forms the basis of a "historic bloc." History, for Gramsci, is a succession of historic blocs created by political practice and not merely a succession of modes of production. A historical bloc represents a unification of various groups with differing interests who have nonetheless come to social-cultural unity under the leadership of the Party. The Party thus has a cultural-communicative function and an anticipatory function: it is an autonomous institution in which genuine democratic equality is practiced.

In recent cultural theory that invokes Gramsci, the role of the Party as the "modern Prince" has atrophied, leading to the widespread view that anything that deals with "power relations" is somehow "political"--a definition that seems to rule out the real types of politics Gramsci was interested in.

To better use Gramsci's notion of hegemony, it is helpful to establish a continuum of domination. Let's assume for a moment that a particular group holds power. They do not hold power for any legitimate reason; in fact, they probably hold power because of past injustices. Life would be better if they did not hold power, at least for the oppressed. How do they retain power, even when an objective observer can see both the injustice of the situation and substantial opportunities for the oppressed group to revolt?

First, the ruling group may employ coercion or the threat of coercion to exact compliance. This strategy has short-term benefits but long-term problems, because it requires constant vigilance and because the ruled group may not produce what the ruling group needs from it as effectively under conditions of constant monitoring.

Second, the ruling group may exert rigid control over the information possessed by the ruled group or may even actively promote a “false consciousness” among the ruled group through institutions that it actively controls. The situation of a Southern textile-mill worker, circa 1920, would fit this strategy. The worker is entirely dependent on the mill-owner for his or her food and shelter and even for educational and religious needs. Any attempts to bring in outside information are rigorously suppressed. This strategy, however, has limited value in a society with diverse interest groups (and social-democratic checks on capitalist power) and increased geographical mobility. Current moves, however, by the FCC to deregulate media ownership threaten to create a monopoly of information. Interest-explanations of ideology are perhaps now more plausible in the U.S. than at any time since before the New Deal.

Third, the ruling group may exert more subtle control over the “common sense” of a whole people by employing intellectuals to represent the status quo in terms that make it seem inevitable and necessary. Dominant sources of information and of motivational appeals will “naturalize” the social order, sometimes even within remarkably broad limits, but the net result is that the ruled accept the necessity of things as they are. The economic policy successes of the Right since 1975 might lead an observer to think that it has actually been only the Right that reads Gramsci. However, because of increased mobility and pluralism, the ruling group cannot control things completely and is as vulnerable to cognitive error and wishful thinking as other groups. Without an economic analysis, a purely communicative approach to hegemony could miss the inherent instability of the capitalist order itself. The ruling group will not only split in terms of regional interest, but it will continually act upon the fallacy of composition: what is good for one firm is good for all. The squeeze of technology on employment, the subversion of the work ethic through consumption, and ruthless competition will tend to create resistance in subaltern groups and also reduce profitability. Add environmental degradation into the mix, and you have a ruling group ultimately eliminating itself and its markets.

A Gramscian explanation of Reaganism, for instance, is that it helped promote a commonsense view of the Market as more efficient and moral than Government. The Reaganite defense of the Market, however, occurred through the mobilization of nationalist appeals to military glory. In the absence of a Communist threat, appeals to the Market have lost their popularity; what remains is a widespread hostility to government in general and also to globalization of the economy. As the neoconservatives at the magazine *The Weekly Standard* have recognized, one cannot build a conservative moment simply on opposition to government, and so they have appealed to the example of Teddy Roosevelt for a new spirit of global and governmental activism on the Right. The current fragmentation of the Right among the Christian social conservatives, libertarians, paleoconservative economic nationalists, and traditional country club Republicans will continue until a new

ideology is crafted. The libertarians and paleoconservatives have defected from George W. Bush's effort to craft a new conservative consensus in the name of fighting terrorism. It remains to be seen whether the nineteen million Christian Right voters who are Bush's strongest political base will be enough to sustain his re-election, especially if Bush pursues a Palestinian state.

The theorizing of a positive moment of hegemony remains limited, probably because of a seemingly congenital negativism among Western leftists since World War II. Gramsci does provide an inspiring defense of the importance of education and of the role of the party as the place where new democratic modes of consciousness can be developed. Gramsci, too, has clarified the sort of things the party must say in building social-cultural unity. The party must build on the moral unity of a social order, expressed in popular forms by representative symbols, myths, and folkloric wisdom, and must guide that moral unity to a new, more sophisticated level. Gramsci, himself of unusually humble origins for a Marxist intellectual, clearly did not believe that capitalism had ruined the wisdom of the people.

Nor had capitalism ruined the heritage of Western culture. Gramsci regarded Marxism as the most recent synthesis of the Western tradition at its best, presupposing, in his words, "the Renaissance and Reformation, German idealism and French Revolution, Calvinism and English classical economics, secular liberalism and this historicism which is at the root of the whole modern conception of life." As Terry Eagleton remarked recently, Marxists have always lived in tradition; only capitalists think they can do without it.

The Party as a form of "anticipatory democracy," the importance of popular culture and communication, the political role of intellectuals, and the notion of the historic bloc--these remain Gramsci's contributions to a theory and practice of emancipatory politics. He taught that "Knowing is never a passive reflection of the given but an act creating the mediations necessary to direct life." One of those necessary mediations is the art of rhetoric, to which I now turn.

A Theory of Rhetoric and Public Address

The development of rhetorical theory in this century has helped us to ask questions about audience, figuration, narrative, and strategy as they interact in practical discourse. An unexamined dimension of rhetorical theory, however, is the role of dialectics and "contradiction" in the practice of advocacy. Even McGee and his students have displayed little interest in traditional Hegelian and Marxist work on the dialectic.

A contradiction is best defined as an opposition that is both necessary for, and yet destructive of, a particular process. Every social process has contradictory tendencies. Marx's understanding of capitalism was that its own need for growth contains self-negating tendencies. The two chief self-negating tendencies are inherent rivalry among capitalist firms and the drive to mechanize production.

What was not clear in Marxism, however, was its awareness of its own dialectical character. If all social processes have contradictory tendencies, and if human beings are forced (whether by the Absolute Spirit or, more likely, by the need to maintain psychological balance) to seek unity in contradiction, then Marxism itself must have contradictions and constructed unities as well.

With contradiction comes the need for mediation. The concept first emerges in Hegel's early reflections on Christology. The problem of alienation, which appears here as the gulf between the finite and the infinite, is mediated by identification with the figure of Jesus, who discovers God within himself and overcomes alienation by a life of self-sacrificing love.

The theme of reconciliation appears on a cosmic scale in the concept of Absolute Spirit. For Hegel, all things are mediated--that is, they are related to everything else and to the Whole. The Absolute is the process of reality coming to know itself. Reality comes to know itself in and through the human spirit. The determinate shape assumed by the Absolute in history is the national spirit.

Marx demythologized Hegel's notion of mediation (although his neglect of the role of nationalism as a powerful mediating force was to come back to haunt Marxism in the twentieth century). For Marx, labor mediates between human beings and nature. The productive activity of the self-mediating natural being is the primary condition for human self-constitution--the ethical basis of Marx's thought. This self-mediation, however, is blocked by historically specific forms of second-order mediation, such as money, exchange, and private property. The "secret of the fetishism of the commodity" is explained by the fact that--under capitalism--the production of use value is mediated by and subordinated to the production of exchange value. As Habermas said recently, the problem with capitalism is that it blinds itself to anything that cannot be expressed in the form of a price. Finally, mediation is also mediation between theory and practice, accomplished by practical activity.

The concept of mediation thus appears when division exists, whether between theory and practice or between the ideal and the actual. Although Kenneth Burke never deals with the concept of mediation in Hegel or Marx, his discussion of identification in *A Rhetoric of Motives* provides some interesting possibilities for

“mediating” the concepts of rhetoric and mediation.

Just as Hegel proclaims that Division is the starting point of philosophy, Burke writes:

Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man’s very essence. It would not be an ideal, as it now is, partly embodied in material conditions and partly frustrated by these same conditions; rather, it would be as natural, spontaneous, and total as with those ideal prototypes of communication, the theologian’s angels, or “messengers.”

The study of rhetoric, then, is the study of the realm of division. The practice of rhetoric involves the construction of identifications, themselves rooted in the properties (and property) of persons, groups, and objects. Identification, as Burke writes, may work through stylistic identification, through identification of the audience’s interests with the speaker’s interests (an identification subject to mystifications of the term “property”), or through metaphoric extension of the parent-child relationship described by the Freudian notions of identification and transference. Transference means to treat someone else as a metaphor.

It is the presence of an audience and of an opponent (whether in the form of a rival policy, person, or culture) that signals the existence of a “rhetorical situation.” The presence of opposition implies a link between rhetoric and dialectic in the Hegelian sense. There are certain predictable points in any controversy at which argument will occur. The classical theorists called these stases. Any debater about public policy knows that certain fundamental questions about the existence of a harm, the question of who is to blame for the harm, how to resolve it, and how much it will cost will appear again and again. A lawyer knows that questions of fact, definition, quality, and jurisdiction will occur in any legal case.

Any persuasive case must learn to incorporate objections based on the stases inherent in the field of argument in which controversy occurs. Some objections, however, stem from the nature of controversy itself, and these objections are dialectical.

Rhetorical practice itself is founded on the fundamental contradiction that the advocate must appear not to be engaged so much in an act of persuasion as in helping the audience discover what they already know. The advocate and audience

may also become so self-conscious of rhetoric as a performance that rhetoric may become a substitute for action. There are other fundamental points in most controversies where self-negating tendencies appear in rhetorical practice.

First, in order to clarify an argument for an audience, an advocate inevitably must simplify it. This act of simplification opens the advocate up to charges of reductionism.

Second, another kind of overstatement occurs when an opposing person or group or system is necessarily depicted as powerful and evil. The advocate may be charged with being unfair or with promoting a sense of futility or “victimhood.” Rhetorical judgment in such cases involves finding the mean between a charitable account of one’s opponent and a depiction of the opponent as all-powerful.

Third, in order to preempt charges of reductionism or oversimplification or overgeneralization, an advocate may have to qualify claims and their general applicability, thus leading to a motivational deficit on the part of the audience. In other words, audience hatred and willingness to act is more easily aroused by simplistic characterizations of the enemy, but the desire to be democratic, liberal, and self-reflexive instills habits of thought that limit the ability to motivate audiences. The effort to present a case to an ideally rational “universal audience” may tend to limit adaptability to particular audiences.

In more classical terms, the division between speaker and audience is mediated by strategies that unite a proposed action with the accepted values, beliefs, and goals of the audience and its culture (logos); strategies that unite action and the audience’s mood (pathos); and strategies that make the speaker a credible representative of the audience’s aspirations (ethos). The self-negating aspects of social practices make the mediating and synthesizing function of rhetorical practice essential to human flourishing.

Insofar as division or alienation has been a constant feature of human societies, the rhetorical impulse appears to be a natural development of other coping mechanisms such as magic and ritual. The specific form of division in modern societies has been an effect of industrialization, the division of labor, and the extension of the market into all spheres of human practice. There is a very real sense in which we are all Marxists now. Neoconservatives and conservative socialists such as William Bennett or Daniel Bell argue that traditional culture plays an essential role in protecting individuals and families from the destabilizing forces of the market. The classical liberals in law and economics and public choice, as well as libertarians generally, reduce all human motivation to economic calculation, differing from Marxism only in their political program: dispersing economic power as widely as

possible until a natural order emerges.

The problem of division in capitalist society can be clarified by the work of sociologists Erik Olin Wright and Anthony Giddens. Wright argued that methodological debates in Marxism tend to respond to the fact that Marx and Engels were up to two very different things: providing an abstract structural map of class relations in *Capital* and providing concrete conjunctural maps of classes-as-actors in the political and historical writings. Although Marx predicted over time that there would be greater and greater convergence between the abstract and concrete class analysis (something that now appears to be happening with the globalization of capitalism), there still remain different levels of abstraction that need to be considered in Marxist analysis.

Following from Wright's work, we can imagine a given social totality at any given moment as split horizontally in two ways: between class structure and class formation. It is split vertically in three ways: the mode of production, the highest or more abstract level of analysis, where, for example, the capitalist mode of production consists of two primary contending classes whose struggle defines a particular epoch; the social formation, where there are more than two primary classes, and human agents may be based in different modes of production and stages of development simultaneously; finally, the conjuncture, which includes contingent historical factors.

Figure 1: Wright's levels of social analysis

| Level of Abstraction | Theoretical Object of Analysis | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| | CLASS STRUCTURE | CLASS FORMATION |
| MODE OF PRODUCTION | Polarized class relations | Epochal class struggle |
| SOCIAL FORMATION | Co-existence of classes | Class alliances based in different modes of production |

| | | |
|-------------|------------------------------|--|
| CONJUNCTURE | Institutional variability | Concrete organizations: in class relations parties, unions in given jobs |
|-------------|------------------------------|--|

What is missing in Wright's analysis is a theory of mediation between class structure and class formation. In other words, how do institutions, practices, and messages shape class formation? What alternative institutions, practices, and messages are available to those who wish to reshape class formations within the framework of structural possibilities? In *Rhetoric and Marxism*, I contended that this untheorized gap in Wright's analysis is present in classical Marxism, and that subsequent theorists have tried to fill in this gap with concepts such as the Leninist vanguard party, the evolutionary socialism of Bernstein, or even "new" classes such as Marcuse's radical students or Gouldner's intellectuals.

My proposal, adapted from Giddens' notion of structuration, contends that communicative practices mediate structure and struggle. These communicative practices can themselves be analyzed at Wright's three levels of abstraction.

At the highest level of abstraction, the mode of production, we see communication technology defining the nature of time and space for social actors. As Harold Innis argued, communication technologies are either space-binding or time-binding, and the particular "bias" of communication under capitalism has been for extension in space at the expense of time and memory. Much of the class struggle under capitalism has consisted of a struggle over control of time itself, particularly the length of the working day. A popular bumper sticker among trade unionists reads, "The Labor Movement--the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend."

Now the class struggle is increasingly defined in spatial terms, as capital becomes increasingly mobile across national boundaries. Many prominent business sources, including *Forbes Magazine* and Esther Dyson, have been arguing quite openly that the nation state itself is doomed thanks to the Internet. First, factories and jobs became increasingly mobile. Now, capital itself has become completely mobile--"millions of ordinary investors can move their wealth between currencies and countries as fast as they can click icons on the screen." The result is that governments are becoming unable to tax at all, and any efforts to provide a minimum standard of welfare are bound to evaporate if another state or government offers a lower tax rate.

In the absence of democratic control over the new technologies, the future holds the

promise of a laissez-faire economic system more brutal than the Dark Satanic Mills of nineteenth-century England or today's maquiladoras. The Internet pornography debate illustrates how cultural issues can still mask economic interests; the real debate should have been about the economic impact of the new technologies, and it did not happen.

In addition to technologically determined time and space, the mode of production level of analysis also includes the role of particular institutions, including communication media, in constituting forms of public deliberation that in turn define the nature of political action. Recent work on the role of newspapers, coffeehouses, and taverns in the development of an eighteenth-century public sphere are good examples of this sort of analysis.

At the level of the social formation and the conjuncture, we find the primary achievement of rhetoric and public address studies: clarifying the role of public argument across American or British history, and providing sensitivity to strategic issues in particular rhetorical situations. On the social formation level we have "macro" studies of public address such as those by Condit and Lucaites or by James Darsey in his recent book on prophetic discourse. At the level of the conjuncture we have close textual analysis and traditional analyses of strategies and effects. The traditional vocabulary of Aristotelian and Ciceronian rhetoric remains useful for theorizing strategy at the conjunctural level, although analyzing rhetorical practice at the level of the social formation has required the development of newer vocabularies.

The vocabulary that best captures the way in which "a" rhetoric at the level of the social formation mediates between structural possibilities and audience action is Condit and Lucaites' description of the role of characterizations, narratives, and ideographs as unifying devices for legitimation strategies.

Characterizations--for instance, "Northeastern liberal," or "soccer Mom"--provide "the first step in the move from the material experience of daily life to collective valuation through the simple process of providing concrete but motivationally loaded names to politically salient entities." Narratives structure "the particular relationships between and among various characterizations. They thus provide an understanding for how material reality holds together and functions." Ideographs, or ideal cultural values, are incorporated into narratives as primary purpose terms. Conservatives, for example, have told a story about urban poverty in which "liberals" [characterization] created the underclass through 1960s antipoverty programs [narrative], which undermined "self-reliance" [ideograph].

What Condit and Lucaites fail to theorize, however, is the principle of movement or

transformation in ideographs, narratives, and characterizations. At a simple level, the ideological imperatives of two accepted ideographs may conflict, as do “liberty” and “equality,” or “community” and the “market.” At a more complex level, it is possible to analyze the semiotic logic governing the relationships between ideology and narrative by mapping a story, as Fredric Jameson writes, as narrative system of characters or agents which is then transformed into “an exchange mechanism by which some final illusion of harmony, some final ‘imaginary’ solution of the contradiction it articulates, can be generated.” Jameson uses A.J.Greimas’ “semiotic rectangle” to illustrate the ways in which fundamental contradictions can generate narrative systems. The semiotic rectangle is “the representation of a binary opposition (two contraries), along with the simple negations (or contradictories) of both terms (the so-called sub-contraries) and the ‘neutral’ term (ideal synthesis of two sub-contraries).” Jameson has used the semiotic rectangle profitably to analyze fictional narratives as well as Max Weber’s sociology.

If we were to try to develop a map of current ideological rhetoric about the global economy, and the developing tension between traditional values and the unfettered market, we might apply Jameson’s insight in this way. The collapse of the Soviet Union has redefined the traditional opposition between “freedom” and “Communism” into a stark revelation of the fundamental contradiction that has been part of the capitalist mode of production from the beginning. The contradiction between the imperatives of the Market and the requirements for human flourishing, or Community, seems to generate the following pattern:



The most overt ideological conflict in the contemporary American social formation is between Clinton's "New Democrats" and the "Christian Right." The peculiarly charged character of that conflict, if my analysis is correct, may lie in their struggle to occupy the same semiotic space as mediators of the Market-Community conflict, with global capitalists on one side and socialists on the other biding their time until the overt conflict sorts itself out or new alliances are formed. Bush's successful mobilization of a fanatic nationalism in the war against Iraq occupies the same semiotic space, but is likely to lose out to more strictly economic concerns in the long run. The risk of fascism as an alternative mediation of the conflict between community and the market is perhaps more real than at any time since World War II.

At the conjunctural level, we find the rhetor exercising political judgment in the selection of ideological raw materials from the characteristic rhetoric of the social formation. For example, following the analysis in *Habits of the Heart*, we could say that Americans have traditionally argued on the basis of a primary rhetoric of individualism, supplemented by secondary rhetorics of biblical justice and republicanism. The precise mix of these appeals is determined by the rhetor, who also constructs his or her own sense of cultural authority (ethos, the "first persona"), a preferred audience (Black's "second persona"), and marginalized audiences (Wander's "third persona").

To summarize, then, a rhetorical reading, in the fullest sense, of a body of texts requires an analysis of the structural limitations upon the "available means of persuasion," limitations which, at the most abstract level, are typically not within the conscious awareness of the advocate. It also requires an understanding of the ideological raw materials drawn on by the rhetor, including narratives, characterizations, evidence, and ideographs. A text or body of texts thus forms a constellation of elements bound together by the rhetorical force inherent in the whole, as a mediating moment between structural possibilities and collective action. At times a text is held together solely by the force of the style or the ethos of the rhetor, or by the accumulated weight of the historical evidence it thrusts on the audience. But texts are unstable entities. The presence of opponents, as well as structural and contingent historical factors, will cause rhetorical moments to move forward, grow, or die. One reads rhetorically in order to accomplish two complementary purposes: evaluation of rhetorical judgment in given cases, and predictive or explanatory understanding of the movement of texts as the building blocks of ideologies--as those ideologies move in historical time. The following diagram represents my modification of Wright's original diagram:

Figure 2: The Levels of Rhetorical Knowledge

| Level of Abstraction | Theoretical Object of Analysis |
|----------------------|--|
| MODE OF PRODUCTION | Communication technology; constructions of time and space; constitution of particular communicative forms and their audiences |
| SOCIAL FORMATION | Primary and secondary “rhetorics,” including recurring narratives, characterizations and ideographs |
| CONJUNCTURE | Contingent features of rhetorical situations, including opponents and resources; particular strategic judgments by rhetors; audience’s and opponents responses |

Rhetorical actions thus represent mediations between structure and struggle, but they also have their own self-negating tendencies, involving simplification, audience adaptation, the presence of opponents, and Burke’s diagnosis of the tendency of rhetors to get caught up in webs of signification they themselves have spun--particularly the tendency of a given vocabulary, once adopted, to seek its own “perfection.” George Bush I’s rhetoric against Saddam Hussein tended to seek its own “perfection” in the concept of “finishing the job we started.” Market rhetoric has a tendency to invade all spheres of life, such as Richard Posner’s proposal for selling babies in order to solve the problems of adoption and abortion, something President Reagan probably didn’t have in mind when he appointed Posner to the 7th Circuit.

Conclusion

This essay has been an effort at clarifying my approach to the rhetorical criticism of ideology, drawing together themes from classical rhetoric, McGee’s materialist rhetorical theory, Gramscian Marxism, Fredric Jameson, and Kenneth Burke. The central themes have been:

- 1) The role of ideology as cognitive distortion, as created by social positioning and economic interests.
- 2) A Gramscian view of hegemony as a political process directed in part by the role of intellectuals in constituting knowledge and common sense.
- 3) A view of rhetoric as a means of resolving social contradictions

and generally mediating between social structures and the possibilities for collective action.

4) A theory of relationships among communication technology, dominant rhetorics, and rhetorical strategy in terms of a general Marxist model of mode of production, social formation, and conjuncture.

But the point, as Marx (and McGee) pointed out long ago, is not just to analyze the world, but to change it. I offer this essay in part as a effort to pay my long-standing debt to McGee, but in larger part to contribute to the emancipatory politics for which he stood.

[Endnotes](#)

[Back to Top](#)

[Home](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Archives](#) | [Editorial Information](#) | [Search](#) | [Interact](#)

Works Cited

1. Michael C. McGee, "In Search of 'the People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61, 3 (October 1975): 235-248.
2. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 366. Eagleton, on the verge of recovering rhetoric in earlier work, seems to abandon this project in his major statement about aesthetic theory. It was in rhetorical education and oratorical practice that these three "mighty regions" were most often connected. See, for example, his "small history of rhetoric" in *Walter Benjamin, Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981) 101-113.
3. See Richard Posner, "Rhetoric, Advocacy, and Legal Reasoning," in his *Overcoming Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995): "We expect ancient and primitive societies to have highly developed rhetorical techniques, because these techniques do not depend on the possession of modern scientific or technological knowledge and because they are especially valuable in settings where information costs are high" (504). See also Alvin P. Gouldner's discussion of the social impact of print in *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* (NY: Seabury, 1976) 91-117. There is difference between the "public" brought into being by modern ideology and print technology and the "audience" of the traditional orator.
4. Milton Friedman had argued that markets and democracy go hand in hand: see *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) 7-21. The economies of China and Singapore—and, increasingly, the U.S.-- suggest otherwise.
5. See Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 459.
6. Elster 465.
7. Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," *Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (NY: International Publishers, 1975) 59.
8. Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 92.
9. Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, 174.
10. Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," 59.
11. Elster 473.
12. James Arnt Aune, *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness* (N.Y.: Guilford Press, 2001).

13. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (NY: International Publishers, 1977), 418.
14. The Party takes the place of “the divinity or the categorical imperative,” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 133.
15. See, for example, Joseph P. Zompetti, “Toward a Gramscian Critical Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Communication* 61 (Winter 1997): 66-86. As is typical of Critical Rhetoricians, Zompetti cannot seem to bring himself to utter the words “working class,” although he manages to dismiss the labor movement in a few sentences.
16. See Elster 44.
17. For an amusing account, see Jacob Heilbrunn, “Con Games,” *New Republic*, October 20, 1997: 17-18.
18. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 395.
19. Paul Piccone, *Italian Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 196-197.
20. The following discussion of mediation draws heavily on the article, “Mediation,” in Tom Bottomore et al., eds., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 329-330.
21. Jurgen Habermas, “What Does Socialism Mean Today?” in Robin Blackburn, ed., *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism* (London: Verso, 1991) 32.
22. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969) 22.
23. The classic statement is Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (NY: Free Press, 1976), recently reissued in a new edition. See also William J. Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children* (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family, 1994).
24. Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985) 6-18; the diagram is reproduced from p. 9.
25. See especially Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
26. See James W. Carey, “Space, Time, and Communications: A Tribute to Harold Innis,” *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 160-161.

27. Peter Huber, "Cyberpower," *Forbes*, December 2, 1996: 142-147. Esther Dyson, *Release 2.0* (N.Y.: Broadway Books, 1997).
 28. Huber 142.
 29. See especially Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 130-131.
 30. John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit, "Reconstructing 'Equality': Culturetypal and Counter-Cultural Rhetorics in the Martyred Black Vision," *Communication Monographs* 57 (1990): 7-8. James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (NY: New York University Press, 1997).
 31. Lucaites and Condit 7.
 32. Lucaites and Condit 7-8.
 33. Fredric Jameson, *Wyndham Lewis: The Modernist As Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 99.
 34. Jameson, *Wyndham Lewis* 99n9.
 35. See Fredric Jameson, "The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller," *The Ideologies of Theory, Vol. 2: The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 10. For another application of the semiotic rectangle to rhetoric, see James Arnt Aune, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Rhetoric of Christian Realism," in Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman, eds., *Post-Realism: The Rhetorical Turn in International Relations* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996) 75-93.
- Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
- See Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *QJS* 55 (1970): 113; Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984) 209.
- See Richard A. Posner, *Sex and Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 409-17.