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Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric

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TO THE EDITOR
Dear Editor,
I am pleased to inform you that the article "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric" by Patricia Roberts-Miller has been accepted for publication in the Fall 2005 issue of Rhetoric & Public Affairs. The article will appear on pages 459-476. Please contact me if you have any questions. Sincerely,
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FORUM

DEMOCRACY, DEMAGOGUERY, AND CRITICAL RHETORIC

PATRICIA ROBERTS-MILLER

For democracy to work, people have to talk. For it to work well, we need to talk well. Or, in other words, a basic principle of democracy is that the ability of the general public to make appropriate decisions depends to a large degree on the quality of public discourse. The more that the public has the ability to argue together about issues of common concern, the more that the polis approaches the goal that political theorists have called “deliberative democracy.” James Bohman has defined this goal: “In democratic deliberation, citizens address one another with their public reasons in the give and take of free and open dialogue.”¹ The goal of this discourse is not simply to impose one’s will on others, nor to induce them (through bargaining or threats) to support one’s policies, but to engage in a discourse “in which citizens and their representatives, going beyond mere self-interest and limited points of view, reflect on the general interest or on their common good.”² This is not some positivist project, in which citizens reflect on what is, epistemologically and ontologically, obviously the true common good, but neither is it one in which people argue for what would serve their own narrow self-interest; it is one in which they argue about what they perceive the common good to be. This is the realm of rhetoric; it is neither positivism nor instrumental rationality.

There is a dilemma, however, and that dilemma is the topic of this article. On the one hand, restrictions regarding “reasonable” behavior have often acted (in consequence, if not intention) to exclude already marginalized groups. On the other hand, there must be some kind of restriction regarding

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violence, threats, and coercion, or this is no longer deliberation. Can we develop a critical rhetoric that articulates standards for good public discourse that does not exclude the already excluded?

That is, restricting public discourse to something often called “objective”—unemotional, materialist, quantifiable—serves to rationalize (in several senses of the word) the disenfranchisement of the already disenfranchised. Linda Alcoff points out the serious political consequences of this view of ideal discourse: “The tyranny of this subject-less, value-less conception of objectivity has had the effect of authorizing those scientific voices that have universalist pretensions and disauthorizing personalized voices that argue with emotion, passion, and open political commitment.”³

Thus, the very kind of rhetoric most likely to effect social change by or on behalf of the oppressed is a priori dismissed, albeit on ostensibly “formal” grounds. It appears, in other words, that there is a dilemma between the goal of inclusion and the need for rules.

Rather than try to resolve this dilemma, I will simply point toward how it might be solved: through a renewed interest on the part of rhetoric teachers, theorists, and critics in the topic of demagoguery. As a field of rhetorical scholarship, demagoguery has more or less disappeared from journals and books—even the recent *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* has no entry for the term. At the same time, projects like deliberative democracy mean that other fields are becoming more interested in it. Thus, considering that political theorists may be rediscovering a wheel, it is worth taking some time to contemplate just why rhetoricians thought that wheel didn’t roll.

In the 1950s and 1960s, probably because of recent experience with demagogues like Adolf Hitler, Theodore Bilbo, and Joseph McCarthy, scholarship on demagoguery was thriving. Reinhard Luthin’s *American Demagogues: Twentieth Century* discussed such notorious figures as Huey Long, Charles Coughlin, and Theodore Bilbo. Charles W. Lomas, in his oft-cited article, defined it: “Demagoguery may be described as the process whereby skillful speakers and writers seek to influence public opinion by employing the traditional tools of rhetoric with complete indifference to truth. In addition, although demagoguery does not necessarily seek ends contrary to public interest, its primary motivation is personal gain.”⁴

This definition represents what might be considered an ethical definition of demagoguery, emphasizing the morals and motives of the rhetor. The problem with this kind of definition is that demagogues may be perfectly sincere, and may even pursue their political agenda at their own personal and political expense. Hitler continued to pursue the Holocaust when it would have been shrewder (from both a political and military perspective) to have shifted resources to the military, or shut down the camps in order to

negotiate for better terms. Theodore Bilbo was on safe ground when attacking proposed anti-lynching laws and defending segregation, but made even political allies blench at his plan to send all African Americans to Africa.⁵

Luthin's definition emphasizes what might be considered a technical definition of demagoguery: something that focuses on the kinds of arguments demagogues make.⁶ He said that demagogues strive for power through exacerbating racial and religious animosities; adopting an ethos of a common man who is fighting the rich (while far from opposed to getting rich themselves in the process); relying heavily on exhibitionism, irrationality, and spectacle; providing simplistic explanations for complicated solutions; and, lastly, trying to control education and restrict the free press.⁷ *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues* (one of the most recent major projects, 1981) does not set out a single definition, but most of the articles implicitly or explicitly define it in terms of the irrationality, populism, and emotionalism of the rhetor's discourse.⁸

It is notable, however, the extent to which this scholarly project lapsed; journals in rhetoric show few or no articles on the subject since Steven R. Goldzwig's 1989 piece on Farrakhan.⁹ "Demagoguery," rather than being a specific kind of rhetoric, is simply a term of abuse that people apply to rhetors with whom they disagree.

There are various reasons that rhetoricians have moved away from the topic of demagoguery. The most obvious, albeit the one I find least persuasive, was a general shift that William Keith has described in communication, from a humanistic to naturalistic model.¹⁰ This philosophical shift often has pedagogical implications, leading to a redesign of the introductory speech course from a course in civic discourse to one in interpersonal communication. It is, explicitly, an abandonment of rhetoric as a critical discipline; instead of trying to describe and promote ethical rhetoric, and thereby condemning some kinds of rhetoric as unethical, proponents of this view are only concerned with determining effectiveness. Such an approach means, of course, that demagogues like Hitler and Bilbo were ideal rhetors simply because they were successful; the extremely unwelcome pedagogical implication is that their rhetoric should be the model for our students.

A second, and equally troubling, reason is that much of the scholarship on demagoguery implicitly or explicitly promoted a somewhat positivist view of public discourse, and many scholars in rhetoric take exception to that view. Goldzwig, for example, has said, "Moralistic preferences for order, civility, rationality, and decorum are still merely preferences. Such preferences may mask injustice, ignore the marginalized, and become rationales for the powerful."¹¹ James Darsey has recently argued that what he calls "prophetic rhetoric" is required for motivating an apathetic audience.¹² The very qualities to which

critics of demagoguery object—its emotionalism, populism, and reliance on spectacle—are the qualities that make it effective for rousing the discouraged. If Goldzwig and Darsey are correct, then by this definition of demagoguery, any social movement rhetoric is inherently demagogic.

Yet, while rhetoricians have stopped theorizing about demagoguery, others have begun to look at it. In addition to the theorists of deliberative democracy, mentioned above, others have raised the issue, if not used the term. In the area of political discourse and action, Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons's *Right Wing Populism* and Jean Hardisty's *Mobilizing Resentment* discuss what amounts to demagoguery in American political history. The World Trade Center terrorism has led to increased interest among religious studies scholars, with books like Charles Kimball's *When Religion Becomes Evil* and Bruce Lincoln's *Holy Terrors*.¹³ The legal and policy questions raised by hate speech have also caused considerable interest in demagogic rhetoric, although, once again, without scholars using the term.

Rather than abandon the goal of defining and criticizing demagoguery, I will propose that we strive for a definition that does not preclude populist social movement rhetoric. My suggestion is that such a definition will look something like the following: demagoguery is polarizing propaganda that motivates members of an ingroup to hate and scapegoat some outgroup(s), largely by promising certainty, stability, and what Erich Fromm famously called "an escape from freedom."¹⁴ I will suggest that some definition along these lines enables rhetorical theorists to be critical, and rhetoric to be normative, but without condemning all activist rhetoric.

Demagogues polarize a complicated (and often frightening) situation by presenting only two options: their policy, and some obviously stupid, impractical, or shameful one. They almost always insist that "those who are not with us are against us" so that the polarized policy situation also becomes a polarized identity situation. This is not to say that they create the perception of a polarized situation—the notion of an embattled and victimized Germany against all others predated Hitler, both Stalin and McCarthy pandered to rather than invented the sense of a world divided into capitalists versus Communists, and Bilbo's sense of a pure and besieged white race was embodied in many state laws. Demagogues may try to intensify the sense of polarization, or shift it slightly (as when Nazi rhetoric shifted the issue from Germans to Aryans), but, primarily, they simply use a preexisting perception.

Connected to their polarization is reliance on ingroup and outgroup thinking. That is, demagogues rely on a common way for people to view the world: there are some people whom we think of as "like us" in some important regard, and others who are very different from us in some equally important regard. While this can be a fairly harmless tendency, social psychologists have

described how this kind of thinking contributes to stereotyping and racism.¹⁵ Alexander Tsesis says that such (generally racist) categories serve to “reduce an entire segment of the population into profligate, pernicious, and dastardly subhumans, quite different from ingroup members. They bolster bigots’ egotism, making them seem a little more perfect in their own eyes, a little closer to the image of God.”¹⁶ This ingroup/outgroup thinking enables members of the ingroup to take the moral high ground, because they see themselves as closer to God; it is therefore ironic that this kind of thinking also results in holding members of the ingroup to lower standards than the outgroup, often rationalizing the bad behavior of ingroup members or dismissing it as an exception.

Our views of people like us (the ingroup) are nuanced and complicated, whereas we define the outgroup by one or two salient and generally negative features that we insist epitomize the entire group.¹⁷ If a person has any quality that we associate with the outgroup, we attribute the negative salient features to them. So, for instance, since Trotskyites were opposed to Stalin’s policies, and so were Kulaks, Stalin could tar the Kulaks with the brush of Trotskyite; McCarthy could accuse anyone in favor of due process of being Communist; bin Laden calls all critics members of the “Zionist-Crusader” alliance.

In demagoguery, there is a tendency to unify the ingroup as well, often in a series of equations. Burke described this process in regard to Hitler:

In sum: Hitler’s inner voice equals leader-people identification, equals unity, equals Reich, equals the mecca of Munich, equals plow, equals sword, equals work, equals war, equals army as midrib, equals responsibility (the personal responsibility of the absolute ruler), equals sacrifice, equals the theory of “German democracy” (the free popular choice of the leader, who then accepts the responsibility, and demands absolute obedience in exchange for his sacrifice), equals love (with the masses as feminine), equals idealism, equals obedience to nature, equals race, nation.¹⁸

Rhetoricians, following Burke, describe this same process as identification and division. Burke claims that consubstantiation considerably complicates identification and division, by enabling divided groups to identify momentarily. An important goal of the demagogue is to prevent exactly that complication: to keep identification strictly within the ingroup, and to ensure no sense of consubstantiation with the outgroup. This is achieved through fostering hatred of the outgroup: “Men who can unite on nothing else can unite on the basis of a foe shared by all.”¹⁹

In demagoguery, outgroups are hated in various ways and for various reasons. They are inferior in whatever qualities the demagogue privileges (honesty,

morality, Aryanism) while being, if not superior, then at least potentially more powerful than the ingroup (better organized, sneakier, richer). They are dangerous because of that power, and often because they are morally and physically infectious, sometimes in extremely vague ways. Burke discusses this slippage in materiality at length in regard to Hitler and syphilis (which wavers between a physical and moral infection caused by the Jews). For Bilbo, it is not clear whether miscegenation is a cause or consequence of some unspecified kind of infection, but the language of disease runs throughout his book.

For most demagogues, the polarization of “those who are not with us are against us” means that membership in the outgroup is defined simply by not being in the ingroup, and this latter membership is demonstrated by unthinking loyalty to the policies of the demagogue. Thus, for Hitler, as Burke pointed out, all opposition to him collapses into Jewification. Some demagogues have multiple outgroups, but the distinction among them can sometimes waver, as there is generally the implication (if not assertion) that the outgroups are working toward a common end. Bilbo, for instance, seems to distinguish between Northerners and nonwhites at moments, but at other moments treats them as equally infectious, and attributes to both the goal of destruction of Southern white manhood.

One of the most powerful (and destructive) ways that the demagogue rouses hatred of the outgroup(s) is through scapegoating. Scapegoating has been usefully defined as “denial through projection.”²⁰ Tsesis has said, “A racist society may actually promote bigotry in order to unite ingroup members and distract them from real political and economic problems by sacrificing a historical scapegoat. Intragroup conflict is diffused by focusing anger on a common target.”²¹ Individuals (or communities) can deny responsibility for a situation by projecting that responsibility onto some outgroup. This is an attractive way of seeing a situation both when the causes are complicated (and there is no clear villain) as well as when the community does not want to hold responsible the individual or group who caused the situation:

The scapegoat bears the blame, while the scapegoaters feel a sense of righteousness and increased unity. The social problem may be real or imaginary, the grievances legitimate or illegitimate, and members of the targeted group may be wholly innocent or partly culpable. What matters is that the scapegoats are wrongfully stereotyped as all sharing the same negative trait, or are singled out for blame while other major culprits are let off the hook.²²

Burke discusses Hitler’s use of this strategy at length. In listing Hitler’s unification strategies, he describes the *Projection* device: the “curative” process that comes with the ability to hand over one’s ills to a scapegoat, thereby getting

purification by dissociation. This device was especially medicinal, since the sense of frustration leads to a self-questioning. Hence if one can hand over his infirmities to a vessel, or “cause,” outside the self, one can battle an external enemy instead of battling an enemy within.²³

The causes of Germany’s postwar economic situation were complicated, and at least partly involved its having lost World War I. Any explanation of either the economic situation or military loss that involved Germany itself being responsible would be extremely unpopular; any explanation that called for significant institutional change would be complicated. With the narrative of the “stab in the back” and a Jewish conspiracy, Hitler could provide a simple and popular explanation for both that enabled Germans to avoid responsibility.

Demagogues sometimes pick outgroups against whom there are legitimate grievances, but then attribute all ills to that group. When McCarthy was active, there were Soviet spies working to undermine the United States, but they were not responsible for setbacks in the Korean War. The United States was plotting against the Soviet Union, but the people Stalin purged were not part of that plot. Osama bin Laden’s list of grievances against the United States mixes legitimate grievances and scapegoating, and the Bush administration’s rhetoric about Saddam Hussein interspersed crimes for which Hussein was responsible with scapegoating for the World Trade Center attack.

The scapegoating of an outgroup means that the solution to the complicated problem is the removal of that group (or the individual who is supposed to lead that group). This is one of the major attractions of demagoguery (for both the rhetor and audience) and explains why it is effective: it takes a tremendously complicated situation, about which people are very anxious, and makes them feel better by presenting a simple solution that anyone can grasp: elimination of the outgroup and promotion of the ingroup. As Fromm said about Nazism, people who feel helpless and insecure are “ready to submit to new authorities which offer . . . security and relief from doubt.”²⁴ That relief is exactly what demagogues offer.

Complicated situations—and all policy situations are complicated—present people with choices about which certainty is impossible. One is faced with what Hannah Arendt described as a kind of existential leap into politics; the need to make a decision with imperfect information means that one will make mistakes. Public argument, she insists, is a risk because we cannot know the outcome of our decisions.²⁵ This situation leads to what she calls “the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing”²⁶

The human possibility of making a decision always involves the equally human possibility of making a mistake—it is the opportunity and responsibility of freedom. That possibility is, as Fromm argued, so frightening for

many people that they look for a way to escape freedom itself. A leader who demands commitment, conformity, and loyalty—especially if that loyalty is described as *unthinking*—enables people to do so. There is a quip sometimes attributed to H. L. Mencken that “for every complex situation, there is a simple solution, and it’s wrong.” For people who desire to escape from freedom, the rightness or wrongness of the solution is irrelevant (they may even say that to take time to try to determine the rightness or wrongness of the potential policies is to aid the enemy): what matters is to do things whose major function is to demonstrate loyalty to the threatened ingroup. A leader (especially one who can present himself or herself as personifying that ingroup) who tells people that they can stop thinking and simply act (and act simply) as s/he dictates frees people of responsibility while seeming to fill their need to see something done.

But all of this leaves aside an important part of my proposed definition: the notion that demagoguery is a subset of propaganda. Propaganda, like demagoguery, can be a more or less meaningless term, simply indicating disapproval. Or, the notion of propaganda—that is, highly fallacious discourse—leads into a dilemma between foundationalism and formalism. Any project grounded in a foundational model of reason is problematic; formalist criteria for fallacies provide little help for criticizing real-world arguments, as they almost never meet formal standards of logic.

One can see the problems by looking at how composition textbooks typically define fallacies. Most commonly, textbook definitions of fallacies have appealed to one (or more) of the following bases: form, audience, or reality. All of these are deeply problematic on their own; textbooks tend to muddle them together. The first method, to assert that fallacies are failures in the form of argument, is exemplified in Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Colomb’s *The Craft of Argument*. They say, “A fallacy is not a false belief. . . . Rather, fallacies are missteps in the process of reasoning your way to a logically sound conclusion. By this definition, you can reason validly and conclude that the earth is flat or fallaciously and conclude that it is round.”²⁷ This approach to the study of fallacies assumes a distinction between the form and the content of an argument. That distinction, while valid for systems of logic grounded in symbolic-mathematical logic (formal logic), does not apply if one asserts that there is a distinction in kind between formal and informal logic.²⁸ Thus, if one follows this line, one has to distinguish, as do Williams and Colomb, between fallacies (what they call “errors in reasoning”) and “inappropriate rhetorical appeals.”²⁹ While a sensible approach, it simply moves the issue of ground to that latter category: is the inappropriateness of the rhetorical appeal determined by the reality of the situation, or by audience perception? If the latter, what audience—actual, intended, or ideal—judges the appropriateness?

Sometimes a fallacy is defined by an appeal to how some audience does (or would) perceive the argument; so, for instance, Gary Layne Hatch says, “Some arguments sound persuasive but actually contain assumptions *most people* wouldn’t accept if they stopped to think.”³⁰ The problem with this definition is that its own implicit line of reasoning—that the judgment of “most people” is reliable—is later identified as fallacious. Hatch says that the fallacy *ad populum* “ignores the fact that the majority may be wrong.”³¹ In short, the definition of fallacy is itself fallacious, by its own standard.

The Scott Foresman Handbook for Writers defines fallacies as “shoddy imitations of well-reasoned arguments,” going on to say, “Most fallacies are flashy shortcuts that look good at first but turn out to be based on dubious assumptions and careless generalizations.”³² There is a crucial ambiguity in this definition of fallacy, however, in that it is not specified *to whom* the argument is dubious and careless. Thus, it is either an audience-based way of characterizing fallacies (it only matters whether the intended audience doubts the premises and desires more care in the generalizations) or a realist method (the assumptions are dubious and the generalizations careless either to everyone or to some ideal knower because they inaccurately represent reality).

The realist route is only tenable if one posits a foundational epistemology, such as a real or hypothetical judge of the argument who knows reality, a fundamentally untenable position. But, as Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst have argued, the audience-based route, while initially more attractive insofar as it does not imply a foundationalist epistemology, more or less precludes the ideal of providing “norms for distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable moves in argumentative discourse.”³³ Van Eemeren and Grotendorst call audience-based methods “anthropo-relativistic,” which is an outlook that “equate[s] reasonableness with the standards prevailing in a certain community and considers an argument acceptable if it meets with the approval of the audience.”³⁴ Effectiveness and validity thereby become synonymous, and there are no grounds from which one might criticize the validity of a popular argument; such an approach obviates any critical function that rhetoric might have (and, not coincidentally, makes the goal of deliberative democracy impossible). In short, conventional methods of describing fallacies do seem to imply a dilemma between a foundationalist epistemology and a deference to dominant ideology.

There are, however, approaches to fallacies that do not force one into this dilemma. Ralph H. Johnson, in *Manifest Rationality*, argues that theorists of argument should be more careful about distinguishing among three different types of reasoning: “argument, inference, and implication.”³⁵ Such a distinction, he argues, can lead to better ways of understanding how standards appropriate to inference and implication should not be applied to argument. While

Johnson's argument is exciting, its dependence on a thorough understanding of twentieth-century trends in logic and argumentation makes it potentially unattractive for many scholars in rhetoric and composition (and I have despaired at the very idea of trying to make the distinction understandable to students).

Another approach involves Bruce Ackerman's minimal rules of argumentation. Ackerman insists upon internal consistency in interlocutors' arguments.³⁶ That is, one cannot put forward as a good reason something which one elsewhere rejects as a bad reason. In addition, one cannot exclude anyone from the argument. Taken together, these two rules mean that the rules for rationality—regardless of what they are—would have to be reciprocal. This alone would be adequate for critiquing one of the main rhetorical moves that demagogues consistently make: holding themselves and members of the ingroup to lower standards than the outgroup. For instance, lying, engaging in violence, or marital infidelity are not only condemned in the outgroup, but used as proof that the outgroup is inherently and essentially evil. The same behavior in the ingroup is denied, redefined, or rationalized. So, for example, Bilbo uses the example of African American men with white wives as proof that all African Americans aspire to miscegenation; after acknowledging that "some whites in the South" have practiced miscegenation, he says, "But the Southern white people have drawn the color line unflinchingly and without deviation." A few pages later, he says, "As disgraceful as the sins of some white men may have been, they have not in any way impaired the purity of Southern Caucasian blood."³⁷ That is, the behavior of African American individuals reflects on the entire group, but the behavior of white individuals does not. Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak explain that this unreciprocal perception is typical of racist discourse:

The image of the . . . ingroup is more differentiated than the images of the others' groups, which, all in all, are much more characterised by 'internal attributions' than the ingroup. The outgroups' actions and behaviour are seldom explained by reference to external factors of communicative situation and historical, social, political and economic context, but primarily by pointing to alleged inherent and essential traits.³⁸

Any arguments grounded in this perception would violate Ackerman's consistency rule, and hence be fallacious.

One common manifestation of inconsistency concerns how the arguments on the various sides are presented. Demagogues polarize a complicated situation into two sides: their side (represented by the ingroup) and one opposition (typically the outgroup and their dupes). If any opposition argument is

presented (and often none is), then the demagogue only presents the weakest version of the weakest possible argument. While there are multiple arguments for the demagogue's proposal, there is only one against. The consistency rule would require that the demagogue present the same number of equally strong arguments on each side.

While Ackerman's approach is not anthropo-relativistic, since the rule of consistency applies regardless of whether it prevails in the rhetor's community, many scholars and teachers in rhetoric may be uncomfortable with it for being too fluid. I have found that it works well in teaching only if students have considerable familiarity with the arguments of the outgroup. If Ackerman's participation rule is violated—and demagogues always do their best to make sure that it is—then the process of seeing the inconsistency becomes more complicated. If there are outgroup students (or readings from outgroup rhetors) present in the course, it is easier for students in the rhetor's ingroup to see the inconsistency; if, on the contrary, the demagogue appeals to ways of characterizing the outgroup that the students accept, then it can be very difficult.³⁹

The third possible route is that indicated by van Eemeren and Grotendoorst. Their basic assumption is that argumentation is discourse oriented toward resolving a dispute, and there are certain rules inherent in such behavior. As they say, "In our approach, committing a fallacy is not automatically considered to be tantamount to unethical conduct: It is wrong in the sense that it frustrates efforts to arrive at the resolution of a dispute."⁴⁰ They set out ten rules of discourse—basically, obligations that must be carried by both parties if the disagreement is to be productive—and describe the fallacies related to each rule. A thorough discussion of each of the rules and the related fallacies would be too time-consuming here, but I do want to indicate the richness of this approach.

The first rule is "Parties must not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints."⁴¹ Various strategies that attempt to do this—threatening harm, engaging in personal attack, trying to discredit the interlocutor—are fallacious because they try to prevent the disagreement from happening at all, thereby precluding its being resolved. The second rule—interlocutors are obligated to defend their standpoints—is violated if they try to evade or shift the burden of proof, such as by "presenting the stand-point as self-evident" or "formulating a standpoint in a nonfalsifiable way."⁴² This latter move involves what van Eemeren and Grotendoorst call "hermetic" wording, such as "Frenchmen are essentially intolerant" or "Women are, by nature, possessive."⁴³ Because one appears to be talking about some "essence," an infinite number of counter-examples does not disprove the assertion; in fact, it cannot be disproved under any circumstances. This fallacy is important in demagogic discourse, as demagogues appeal to essential notions of races,

nationalities, genders, religions, and political systems, worded in exactly the way that van Eemeren and Grootendorst describe. Because they are appealing to a socially constructed image of the race, nationality, and so on, any actual counter-examples can be dismissed.

Just as interlocutors must defend the standpoint they really present, so they must attack the standpoint really presented by their opponent, and that is the third rule. Misattributing an argument (such as accusing someone of being on the side of terrorists for disagreeing with the United States), or distorting an argument (such as presenting the weakest version) constitutes violations of this rule. The fifth rule (interlocutors must accurately represent the unexpressed premises of themselves and the others) and sixth rule (both parties must accurately represent the accepted starting point) are similar in effect: all three of these rules imply a contractual view of argumentation.⁴⁴ That is, one of the paradoxes of argument to which various theorists have pointed is that productive argumentation depends upon disagreement *and* agreement. The parties must agree just what is at issue, and they must fairly represent their own arguments as well as the opposition's arguments, while they take responsibility for their premises. These rules are almost always violated by demagogues, who misrepresent the opposition and often misrepresent the stasis of the argument: McCarthy tried to shift criticism of him into attacks on Christianity; Stalin misrepresented resistance to his policies as anticommunism.

The fourth rule is that interlocutors must defend their standpoints with relevant forms of argumentation. If they do not, then, "in effect, the argumentation supports a standpoint that is quite different from the one about which the opinions differ."⁴⁵ This is the point at which van Eemeren and Grootendorst discuss pathos appeals, which they do not reject out of hand. Such appeals, they say, are fallacious if "the purpose of exploiting the audience's emotions is to play on prejudices of the audience that are not directly relevant to the standpoint being defended."⁴⁶ Similarly, they do not reject all arguments from ethos, but do point out that any such arguments that substitute the expertise of the rhetor for arguments are no longer disagreements oriented toward resolution. If people decide to rely on the expert, "we do have to realize that a real resolution of the dispute is then precluded: We let the experts 'settle' it."⁴⁷ This is an important point for thinking more productively about the distinction between demagoguery and legitimate social movement rhetoric in that it does not forbid all emotional appeals. That is, Hitler's rabid anti-Semitic rhetoric was fallacious not because it was rabid, although it was, but because it was irrelevant.

The seventh rule ("A party may not regard a standpoint as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argumentation scheme that is correctly applied") and eighth rule ("a party may

only use arguments that are logically valid or capable of being validated by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises”) concern the interlocutors’ need to reach mutual agreement as to when the argument is concluded.⁴⁸ The eighth rule, for instance, precludes an interlocutor saying s/he has reasons or evidence that the other party must accept, but that s/he will not or cannot present, while the seventh forbids one person declaring the argument conclusively defended.

This is important for the ninth rule, which is that people must change their minds if they fail to defend a standpoint or if the other people succeed in defending theirs.⁴⁹ That is, there must really be something at stake in the process of argumentation. If people will hold their positions regardless of whether their evidence and reasoning turn out to be false, then it is not a topic for argumentation. It is, instead, a logically closed system. This, too, is important for considering demagoguery, as demagogues almost always present exactly such a system, and it’s likely that that is one of the attractions: they promise their followers *certainty*. This certainty is not the same as accuracy, however; it results from their offering an ideology that is impervious to argumentation (not because it is true, but because it is formulated in such a way that it cannot be disproven).

The last rule forbids what has sometimes been called “mystagoguery”—that is, the attempt to triumph in discourse through being so unclear that no one can disprove the mystagogue’s argument.⁵⁰ Like many of the other requirements, this one serves to ensure that the issue can be resolved discursively. If interlocutors are incomprehensible, then it becomes difficult (if not impossible) to determine what schemes of argumentation would be relevant support; this can be another way of making one’s statements hermetic.

As I said, it is impossible to go into each rule in detail, but I hope that this brief discussion is enough to show that this is a method of distinguishing fallacious from legitimate argumentation that does not land one in appeals to foundational epistemology or an acceptance of all argument. Nor do these ways of thinking about the legitimacy of an argument demonize emotionalism, populism, or anti-intellectualism, the problematic aspects of traditional definitions of demagoguery. On the contrary, it is my conviction that demagoguery can be unemotional, elite, and intellectual, as in the cases of Joseph Stalin or John Calhoun (especially his speeches on the “gag rule”).

There are, however, problems with my definition. One potential weakness of this project as I’ve laid it out is that, like most other writers on demagoguery, I have discussed it as something done by individual demagogues, and this approach simply follows usage going at least as far back as Thucydides. But, it is quite possible to have demagoguery without demagogues because demagogues rarely create new perceptions as much as pander to and inflame

existing and pervasive hatred of certain groups. As Ian Kershaw says, “Much of the pot-pourri of ideas that went to make up Nazi ideology—an amalgam of prejudices, phobias, and utopian social expectations rather than a coherent set of intellectual propositions—was to be found in different forms and intensities before the First World War, and later in the programmes and manifestos of fascist parties of many European countries.”⁵¹ As Tsesis says, “The road to persecution is paved by communications confirming to prejudiced individuals that outgroup members are subordinate and unworthy of equal treatment. The cognitive foundations of bigotry are found in cultural discourse.”⁵²

The culture of hatred and fear preexists, and the demagogue uses them; like any other ideology, that culture can be fostered and confirmed by people with an agenda no more complicated than making a profit by getting more readers or viewers. *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues* suggests that several such rhetors were not especially racist in private life, that they simply saw race-baiting as a powerful political tool. Barry Glassner, in *Culture of Fear*, does not argue that the media engage in fear-mongering about road rage, killer moms, or hip-hop artists out of any sophisticated philosophy or coherent political agenda; such alarmism is profitable. Demagoguery, in other words, is not necessarily part of an intentional political agenda, but can result from the tendency that the media have to reinforce stereotypes about various outgroups. Hence, we should consider thinking about demagoguery not simply as something done by individual demagogues, but as an ideological and discursive practice that may dominate a culture.

Perhaps the most obvious problem with my definition, and the one that several of my students have criticized, is its focus on discourse—on demagoguery as a rhetorical rather than policy issue—and they have an excellent argument. I raised the issue of demagoguery as necessarily following from the project of deliberative democracy, which itself is struggling with the question of the relation of discourse and institutional structure. Advocates of deliberative democracy ponder whether an egalitarian, inclusive, and critical discourse can take place in political situations of inequality, exclusion, and conformity. Will striving for such a discourse improve the political situation, or is it effectively precluded? Must the political change happen before the discourse?

The assumption behind my definition, and possibly even behind the project of a critical rhetoric, is that policy depends upon rhetoric, but the exact relationship is unclear. Certainly, a demagogue’s success depends upon more than just effective rhetoric. As Kershaw says, “Without the changed conditions, the product of a lost war, revolution, and a pervasive sense of national humiliation, Hitler would have remained a nobody. . . . Another time, another place, and the message would have been ineffective, absurd even.”⁵³ In addition, Hitler succeeded because he received important support of various kinds from

politically powerful supporters (not the least of which was the lenient sentence at his second trial): “Hitler would have remained a political nonentity without the patronage and support he obtained from influential circles in Bavaria.”⁵⁴ The assistance of the FBI was crucial for McCarthy’s success; it is hard to imagine that Stalin would have done as well as he did without the purges; and Bilbo’s reelections would not have happened without the disenfranchisement of nonwhite voters, which itself depended upon various forms of violence and intimidation.

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss their rhetoric as an incidental characteristic completely subsumed to policies. Certainly the effectiveness of Hitler’s rhetoric was contingent on the context, but it was effective rhetoric. The newspaper correspondent William L. Shirer described the extraordinary power of the Nuremberg Rally: “At Nuremberg I grasped for the first time that it was Hitler’s eloquence, his astonishing ability to move a German audience by speech, that more than anything else had swept him from oblivion to power.”⁵⁵ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler discusses the importance of rhetoric, but he also describes the effectiveness of physical intimidation—such as provoking hecklers whom his goons could assault. The demagogue’s effectiveness is somehow facilitated by such actions, and also by the kinds of policies they tend to enact. As Luthin said, demagogues always attack the press and try to control educational systems (firing scholars and teachers who criticize them and cutting funding to institutions that serve as forums for dissent).⁵⁶ One might note other constants in demagogues’ policies: they shift the focus of education from critical thinking and reasoning to inculcation of respect for authority and nationalism; they pass laws that demand respect for symbols, criminalize dissent, decriminalize vigilantism, and suspend or revoke civil rights (especially regarding due process). Obviously, policy and rhetoric are somehow connected. It is my hope that a functional definition of demagoguery might facilitate investigation of just what that connection is. That is, the hypothesis that oppressive and repressive policies are connected to demagogic discourse is something that can be tested through research.

There are a variety of questions that might be part of that research project. For instance, there is the issue of what specific characteristics demagogic rhetoric has, and whether it changes for different political agendas. Reactionary demagogues posit a time when identities and roles were stable and when there was perfect agreement. This Edenic stability was destroyed by the outgroup (so, for instance, proslavery demagoguery asserts that slave culture was stable and slaves were happy till abolitionists started pamphleteering). What about demagogues arguing for major social and institutional change? Do they avoid this fictitious nostalgia entirely, or substitute something else?

My students always point out that my basic assumption is that demagoguery is necessarily harmful, and this is an interesting question as well. Is it always harmful? Are there good kinds of demagoguery? Is it only harmful if the demagogue is powerful enough to effect policy changes? Does humor change the consequences of the demagoguery?

As is obvious from these questions, I am not claiming to have settled the dilemma of rules and inclusion, nor even to have conclusively demonstrated what demagoguery is, let alone what should be done about it. My intention is to raise interest in the research project and revivify scholarship on demagoguery. Burke, in “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” explains the significance of this kind of scholarship:

Here is the testament of a man who swung a great people into his wake. Let us watch it carefully; and let us watch it, not merely to discover some grounds for prophesying what political move is to follow Munich, and what move to follow that move, etc.; let us try also to discover what kind of “medicine” this medicine-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America.⁵⁷

I can’t say it any better myself.

NOTES

1. James Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 7; see also Iris Marion Young, “Communication and the Other,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 121.
2. Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, 5.
3. Linda Alcoff, “How Is Epistemology Political?” in *Radical Philosophy: Tradition, Counter-Tradition, Politics*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 74.
4. Charles W. Lomas, “The Rhetoric of Demagoguery,” *Western Speech* 25 (1961): 161.
5. Theodore G. Bilbo was twice elected governor of Mississippi and thrice elected senator (although he was not seated the third time and formally censured). An advocate of segregation and defender of using lynching in order to prevent African Americans from voting, Bilbo’s 1947 book, *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* (Poplarville, MS: Dream House Publishing Co.), argued for sending all African Americans “back” to Africa.
6. I am grateful to Jeff Walker for the technical-ethical distinction.
7. Reinhard Luthin, *American Demagogues: Twentieth Century* (1954; Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1959), see especially the final chapter.
8. Cal M. Logue and Howard Dorgan, eds., *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

9. Steven R. Goldzwig, "A Social Movement Perspective on Demagoguery: Achieving Symbolic Realignment," *Communication Studies* 40 (1989): 202–28.
10. William Keith, "Identity, Rhetoric, and Myth: A Response to Mailloux and Leff," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30 (2000): 95–106.
11. Goldzwig, "A Social Movement Perspective on Demagoguery," 204.
12. James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).
13. Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000); Jean Hardisty, *Mobilizing Resentment: Conservative Resurgence from the John Birch Society to the Promise Keepers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002); Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
14. The phrase is the title of Erich Fromm's deservedly famous *Escape from Freedom* (1941; New York: Avon Press, 1970), in which he argues that one of the major attractions of Nazism was that it provided an escape from the cognitive, moral, and psychological challenges of freedom.
15. The most commonly cited research on this point is Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner's "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1988), 7–24.
16. Alexander Tsesis, *Destructive Messages: How Hate Speech Paves the Way for Harmful Social Movements* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 89.
17. George A. Quattrone, "On the Perception of a Group's Variability," in Worchel and Austin, *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, 25–48.
18. Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 207.
19. Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" 193.
20. Richard Landes, "Scapegoating," in *Encyclopedia of Social History*, ed. Peter N. Stearns (New York: Garland, 1994), 659.
21. Tsesis, *Destructive Messages*, 85.
22. Berlet and Lyons, *Right-wing Populism in America*, 8.
23. Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" 202–3.
24. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 230.
25. See especially Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 180, 184–85, 190–92.
26. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.
27. Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Colomb, *The Craft of Argument*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2003), 363.
28. For more on this distinction, and the problem with this application of formal logic, see Charles Hamblin, *Fallacies* (London: Methuen, 1970).
29. The first and second errors are discussed on pages 363–66.
30. Gary Layne Hatch, *Arguing in Communities*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1999), 171, emphasis added.
31. Hatch, *Arguing in Communities*, 174.

32. Maxine Hairston, John Ruszkiewicz, and Christy Friend, *The Scott Foresman Handbook for Writers*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 185.
33. Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies: A Pragmatic-Dialectical Perspective* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992), 104.
34. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 6.
35. Ralph H. Johnson, *Manifest Rationality: A Pragmatic Theory of Argument* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 25.
36. Bruce Ackerman, *Social Injustice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), see especially 7–8.
37. Bilbo, *Take Your Choice*, 51, 57.
38. Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Anti-Semitism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 11.
39. I've often been struck by how little students know about opposition arguments and about who makes them. Students writing on Jerry Falwell, for instance, often simply accept his assertion that only atheists oppose school prayer; having never looked at the court cases, let alone read arguments against school prayer, they believe his characterization of that group. That students who listen to him would make such a mistake shouldn't surprise me, but that students critical of him also make it does surprise me.
40. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 105.
41. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 108.
42. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 118, 119.
43. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 119. The distinction between “women are, on average, less skilled in math” and “women are, in essence, less skilled in math” is, as a recent Harvard president discovered, crucial.
44. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 142, 151.
45. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 133.
46. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 134.
47. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 136.
48. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 159, 169.
49. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 185.
50. van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies*, 196.
51. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 134, see also 135–37.
52. Tsesis, *Destructive Messages*, 86.
53. Kershaw, *Hitler*, 132.
54. Kershaw, *Hitler*, 133, see also 197–98, 213, 216–18.
55. William L. Shirer, *Twentieth Century: A Memoir of a Life and the Times*, vol. 2: *The Nightmare Years, 1930–1940* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1984), 127.
56. Luthin, *American Demagogues*, 312.
57. Burke, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” 191.