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Rethinking Rhetorical Education in Times of Demagoguery

Michael J. Steudeman

Historical efforts to thwart demagoguery through rhetorical pedagogy have inadvertently abetted further demagoguery. Highlighting three American episodes of pedagogic backfire, this essay interrogates how teachers of rhetoric have fueled resentments, upheld logics of exclusion, or presumed an exceptional immunity to demagogic cooptation. Theorizing demagoguery and democracy as reciprocal forces that operate through the same rhetorical and institutional structures, this essay advises an attitudinal reorientation toward teaching rhetoric that emphasizes spontaneity and vigilance in the face of demagoguery's continual infiltration of discursive practices.

Keywords: American education, citizenship, demagoguery, exceptionalism, resentment, rhetorical pedagogy

Public education was never meant to only teach the three R's, history, and science. It was also meant to teach citizenship.

—Donald J. Trump with Dave Shiflett, *The America We Deserve* (67)

Just as the Soviet Union's 1957 Sputnik launch inspired a wave of anxieties about American science education, the election of President Donald J. Trump prompted a "Sputnik moment" for civics education (Ehrlich; Valant). Across the political spectrum, public intellectuals penned thinkpieces and held panels to condemn the absence of "reflective citizens who ... resist the appeals of demagogues" (Kahlenberg and Janey par. 4; see also Burgess). At the 2017 Democracy at a Crossroads National Summit, speakers like Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor encouraged schools to redouble their emphasis on teaching deliberation, media literacy, and trust in institutions (Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg). Sharing a deep investment in the health of democratic discourse, scholars of English and communication have echoed these concerns. As Linda Adler-Kassner lamented, the 2016 election surprised many scholars of rhetoric and composition, who soberly

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realized that “what we believe about writing might not be as widely shared as we’d presumed” (3:27). Rhetorical educators have thus called to renew a collective focus on “the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, the limits of free speech, the threat posed by propaganda and demagoguery, [and] the ethics of political advocacy” (Hogan and Kurr 8). Across these post-2016 jeremiads, there has been a recurring theme: susceptible citizens were not properly trained to guard against the wiles of demagoguery.

We have been here before. Anxiety about unprepared citizens has been a theme of rhetorical pedagogy from the early republic to the Progressive Era to the present (see, e.g., Gehrke 33–59; Longaker 36–40; Rufo and Atchison 199). For two centuries, American rhetoricians have encouraged various pedagogies of “inoculation and resistance” to help students guard against the chaos of mass culture and the words of unscrupulous rhetors (Paine xi). Especially in moments of demagogic ascendance—the election of Andrew Jackson, southern secession, the era of McCarthyism, or our present moment—calls for immunizing pedagogy have been particularly pronounced. Across these instances, proponents of civic education were correct to be concerned about a rise of demagoguery: discourse that emphasizes in-group identity, sidesteps the complexities of democratic deliberation, and frames policy solutions as a matter of punishing or excising an out-group (Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery* 32–35). Yet these paeans to rhetorical education have seldom mitigated the cultures of demagoguery that pervaded their respective eras. At their most problematic, rhetoricians’ appeals have even nourished the resentments, inequalities, and in-group logics they initially set out to combat.

Confronting demagoguery demands a vigilance from the defenders of rhetorical pedagogy for how our critiques may be misinterpreted, intensified, and misdirected in a culture that is already demagogic. Drawing from examples throughout American history, this essay interrogates three ways in which efforts to promote civic education backfired by assuming a vantage point somehow “outside” the culture of demagoguery. By stressing the inadequacies of voters, they fueled the politics of resentment. By identifying the “ignorant” as the source of social problems, they adopted their own demagogic rhetoric of expulsion and exclusion. Or by declaring the exceptionalism of rhetorical pedagogy and practices, they did not consider how such practices could be coopted to demagogic ends. Across each of these pitfalls, the presumed vaunted position of the rhetorical educator led to a pedagogical approach that bred indignation, reified hierarchies of intelligence, or posited a superior position resistant to demagoguery. Acknowledging the history of these pedagogical missteps—and the present risk of their recapitulation—this essay ultimately calls for an attitudinal reorientation in how we promote and practice rhetorical education.

Feeding the Politics of Resentment

Intricately related, demagoguery and resentment are both impulses that leaders of civic republican regimes have sought to suppress. Resentment sustains

demagoguery as an emotion generated amid conditions of inequality and injustice, whether real or imagined. A perpetual danger to political elites, democratic leaders have long set about “controlling, normalizing, manipulating, and taming civic resentment so that it does not explode into revolutionary acts” (Engels 19). For the most idealistic and hopeful of political reformers, civic education has long promised a way to ameliorate the sources of resentment. If the uneducated masses of Jacksonians could be trained in their civic duties, common school leaders insisted, they would “throw off the self-assumed inferiority which their leaders have taught them to put on for effect” (“Radicalism” 144). If working people could be educated to understand the laws of the market economy, Gilded Age liberals implored, they would recognize their mutual stake in the capitalist system and cease their labor agitation (Cohen 31–32). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, policy makers of varying political persuasions advocated education reforms designed to help susceptible factions pursue routes of civility, redirect their resentments, and protect themselves from demagogues. Underlying these centuries-long efforts has been a persistent vision of the school as a great ameliorator, as the “balance wheel of the social machinery” capable of rendering inconsequential the distinctions of inherited class, sect, or nativity (Mann 669–70). Taking aim at demagoguery at its resentful root, this rhetoric of civic education often backfires by cultivating resentments predicated on education itself.

American education has been prone to resentful backlash since its earliest engagements with demagoguery. For Whig common school leaders like Horace Mann, the rise of Jacksonian democracy represented a crisis of rapidly expanding participation among uneducated voters (Dotts). New York school reformer Orville J. Taylor, for instance, claimed that schools had taught “a *little smattering of a few instruments of knowledge*—that, which the demagogue, the imposter, and the fanatic would like taught. ... [E]nough to read what they say; but not enough to know whether it is true or not” (3, emphasis in the original). Throughout the 1830s, this bombastic rhetoric stoked growing resentments among working-class leaders who were already critical of an educational “aristocracy” and the “*feudal forms of all colleges and universities*” (Simpson 149, emphasis in the original). In rural communities, efforts to reform teachers and curricula were regarded as an elite imposition. Popular stories and memoirs about schooling unsobly represented this dynamic with scenes of children barricading schoolhouse doors against their disdainful teachers (Speicher 59–62). In Massachusetts, Mann had only led the state’s nascent school board for two years when Democrat Marcus Morton campaigned—and won—largely on a pledge to have the board abolished. Appealing to pedagogic resentments, he claimed that men of elite “higher branches” had usurped the “little pure democracies” of town school meetings (30). As common school reformers exerted their ideals across large swaths of the north and west, they played directly into brewing indignations. In the 1840

election, elite calls for reasoned discourse were glibly dismissed even by most Whigs, who embraced a stump-speaking, sloganizing brand of politics in their campaign for William Henry Harrison (Antczak 21–24).

As common school reformers discovered, stressing the ignorance of voters creates a danger of affirming adults' resentments before ever having a chance to alter young people's rhetorical practice. When academics panic about the unprepared voter today, the conditions for pedagogic resentment are even more pronounced. Educational sociologist David P. Baker argues that, over the past several centuries, schooling has overturned long-standing ideas about social hierarchy to become a dominant arbiter of social worth, dignity, and mobility (54). So pervasive as to be treated as self-evident and invisible, this educational transformation has led those unable or undispensed to perform within schools to increasingly "see themselves as failures—less than fully actualized persons" (3; see also Lampert). Some people respond to this sense of failure by grudgingly pursuing further education later in life. Others conclude that the academic bar was *never* in reach—that it was deliberately made inaccessible by those elites who, equal or lesser by birthright, citizenship, or politics, benefited from stacking a system of merit in a way that favors "their" brand of intelligence. By rejecting schooling as a means of conferring social status, pedagogic resentment thus restructures "the *values themselves* which could bestow excellence on any possible objects of comparison" (Scheler 40, emphasis in the original). In the United States, where education reforms since the 1980s have favored a politics of accountability, standardized testing, data tracking, merit pay, and other modes of competitive comparison, the conditions for feelings of failure and concordant resentment have ripened across the political spectrum. It is no wonder, as journalist Chris Arnade observes, that Trumpian resentment finds its earliest origins in the cultural divide between the "front row kids" and the "back row kids" in the classroom.

Even for the relatively small number of students with the privilege to attend college, resentments toward academic hierarchy often remain intact. Historically rooted in a civic republican tradition that tethers virtue to expectations about political practice, the tradition of rhetorical education risks inflaming these resentments. Historically, it has done so by setting a higher bar for dignity than civic traditions based on ascriptive traits like race or heritage (Smith 37). For the student accustomed to demagogic discourses that affirm those received traits, the encounter with rhetoricians' stringent argumentative demands can sound patronizing. The modes of reasoning the student has cultivated for years, their teachers now imply, *no longer suffice*. The sources to which they appeal, the values they have accepted, the common sense they have developed—none of it "counts" for the persuasive speech or debate exercise. Rhetorical pedagogy thus threatens the emotional structure of a student's certainty—an act that entails destabilizing not only explicit political views but the axis of unarticulated assumptions that made

those views possible (Wittgenstein §152). Informed by the politics of resentment prevalent in the United States, students may read this challenge to their ingrained convictions as indicative of university elites' disdain toward "the knowledge and norms of the people living in their communities" (Cramer 123). Especially when the demands of citizenship are presented in the form of polemics, think tank grouses, or blunt critiques of student work, our efforts to mitigate resentment may merely confirm students' preexisting suspicions. Meanwhile, those students who embrace rhetorical pedagogy carry these practices into the wider public sphere. Affirming the presumptive inoculations of many in their communities, they may further reify the educational underpinnings of our demagogic culture.

Constituting the Category of the "Ignorant"

The danger for rhetorical education is not merely that its charge will be *interpreted* as exclusionary, but that it can succumb to demagogic impulses to exclude and expel. Rhetoricians often operate within a discourse of citizenship that upholds logics of civic inclusion and exclusion (Chávez). Informed by a scholarly approach that valorizes efforts to gain recognition or produce change within the structure of citizenship, our pedagogy often centers on the types of practices that garner recognition and respect within a normative civic frame. Pushed far enough, this notion gives way to an embrace of assumptions that misdiagnose the roots of demagoguery and belie the democratic mission of rhetorical pedagogy. Those lacking in the proper norms and expectations that accompany rhetoric become read as delinquent, a drag or danger to society, easily lured by unscrupulous rhetors. As Jacques Rancière puts it, the world becomes "divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid" (*Ignorant* 6). Beginning from the presumed inequality among social participants, rhetorical pedagogy's charge becomes one of shrinking the ranks of the ignorant—and, in the interim, mitigating their pernicious effects on the body politic. From this perspective, those who have not learned to properly read, deliberate, or critique need to either be brought up to speed or left out of the conversation altogether. Embracing this "instituted social fiction of inequality as lateness" (*Ignorant* 132), rhetoricians risk constituting the "ignorant" as a category of second-class citizens—the scapegoats for our own type of demagoguery.

The post-Civil War panic over demagoguery highlights how a rhetoric of education can evolve into a form of out-group exclusion. Postbellum Republican Party leaders commonly shared the opinion of Representative Samuel Moulton that if the "ignorant classes, the great mass of the people of the South, had been educated to the extent of the people of Ohio, New England, and the middle States," they would not have fallen for "the scoundrels, traitors, and demagogues of the South" (U.S. Congress). Invoking former rebels' ignorance as a reason to delay their political recognition, Republicans set the stage for a widening

definition of “demagoguery.” Soon, opponents to civil rights applied the same rationale to deny suffrage to black men who, barred from education all their lives, would be easily manipulated by demagogues (Richardson 63). At first employed as a proxy for other types of exclusion, gradually “illiteracy” grew to be recognized as a civic category that could be measured, mapped, and maligned. Speaking to the Ohio Teachers’ Association in 1875, U.S. Representative and former Oberlin College professor James Monroe took aim at this demographic. “While the whole nation very properly unites in scolding demagogues,” he said, “it leaves almost undisturbed and certainly uncleansed some of the very sinks that breed them.” Americans had divided “into two classes”: one that “reads, thinks, analyzes, criticises, reasons, and brings a bright and quick intelligence to all affairs,” and another steeped in “permanent and self-satisfied ignorance” (360). In the name of averting demagoguery, then, Monroe bifurcated the nation into “us and them,” called for the purification of the “uncleansed,” and called to solve complex policy issues by making the category of “illiterates” disappear through acts of pedagogic violence.

As this Reconstruction-era example demonstrates, calls to make citizens better-prepared to thwart demagogues can slide into a demagoguery directed against the “uneducated” as a group. That slide begins from the false equivocation of ignorance, illiteracy, and an absence of formal education with demagogic susceptibility. In the post-Trump scholarship of civic educators, it has become commonplace to draw this equivocation: to claim that “illiteracy is now a scourge and a political tool” (Giroux 15) or that the election “exposed the lack of critical thinking skills of one third of the country” (Rubin 153). The problem with this conclusion is that it elides an important, and widely misunderstood, element of demagoguery: that it “can be unemotional, elite, and intellectual” (Roberts-Miller, “Democracy” 471). Indeed, practitioners of demagogic arguments often wield elaborate chains of reasoning, a repertoire of rhetorical maneuvers, and a writing style that follows sophisticated academic conventions. As danah boyd points out, even those who embrace demagogic conspiracy theories like “Pizzagate” couch their acceptance in tenets of media literacy that rhetorical scholars have touted for years: skepticism toward media sources, independent judgment, and a willingness to seek out the “truth” for oneself. Furthermore, the oft-expressed claim that demagogues prefer an “uneducated” electorate does not pass muster. Take Huey P. Long, who campaigned on the promise of a textbook for every child and offered unprecedented support to Louisiana State University during his time as governor of Louisiana (Hair 227–28). Long, for one, did not seem particularly concerned about a literate constituency “seeing through” his demagoguery.

The false equivalence of ignorance with susceptibility has a potent consequence: it defines an out-group to expel. Since the nineteenth century, anxiety over the “ignorance” of voters has been invoked to justify a wide range of political exclusions (e.g., Schudson 182–85). Although education has often served as

a thinly veiled rationale to disenfranchise groups based on race or nativity, the category of the “uneducated” can be ostracized in its own right. In the era of the Tea Party and Trump, scholarly arguments for “epistocracy”—rule by the knowers—have made this call for exclusion explicit. In *Against Democracy*, Jason Brennan contends that the bitter hatreds of contemporary politics stem from the universal extension of suffrage to all adults, no matter their civic competence. To make the sphere of politics less rancorous, he identifies a category of ignorant citizens and calls to weaken their role in political decision making. Tellingly, he draws on the familiar demagogic appeal to victimage, asserting that the better-informed should not suffer for the choices of the poorly educated. “When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies *not permitting* them to exercise political authority over others. ... [T]o protect innocent people from their incompetence” (17, emphasis in the original). Even if being uneducated were always a personal choice—and it certainly is not—Brennan’s argument would still follow a dangerous trajectory. In the name of alleviating the sources of demagoguery, his scapegoating of the “ignorant” voter ascends a demagogic ladder that leads toward expulsion (Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery* 81–87). For a disciplinary tradition historically concerned with the preparation of “good citizens,” it is important to remain wary of where that ladder could lead.

Rhetorical Exceptionalism

In addition to ostracizing an out-group of the “ignorant,” rhetorical pedagogues harbor a commensurate risk of insulating an in-group of “responsible citizens” from critical self-reflection. Committed to certain liberal democratic practices of debate, dialogue, and deliberation, there persists among rhetoricians a faith in those processes as a way of avoiding demagoguery. Throughout the twentieth century, this belief among rhetoricians formed part of a broader unreflective commitment to American institutions and norms as the antithesis of authoritarians abroad (Singh 488). Fused with a tradition of Protestant millennialism, this commitment became central to American exceptionalism: a concept of the United States as a pluralistic space uniquely conducive to the norms of free speech, reasoned debate, and rational decision making (Greene and Hicks, “Lost” 114–15). Today, the belief persists that an American model of civic education can “train students across the world in constitutional values” and immunize them against anti-American demagogues (Signer 221). Exceptionalism likewise persists in the common refrain heard in reaction to Trumpism: “That’s not the America I know.” As a discipline, our periodic slide into unreflexive nationalism is symptomatic of a broader belief in the exceptionalism of our own institutional, deliberative, and formal commitments. Whether attached to the nation or not, rhetorical exceptionalism cultivates a “trained incapacity” (Burke, *Permanence* 7), one that willfully ignores the ways democratic norms can be subverted by demagoguery. By overinvesting in certain discursive forms, rhetoricians risk

limiting our options for promoting spontaneous democratic practice and our capacity to adapt to demagoguery.

The exceptionalism of rhetorical pedagogues in the early twentieth century offers a cautionary tale in the enabling of demagoguery. In 1917, when Woodrow Wilson justified entry into World War I by claiming “the world must be made safe for democracy” (par. 33), optimistic civic educators embraced the patriotic cause. John Dewey, for one, believed that Americans could develop “a novel psychosis for war” informed by “the political education undergone by the American people during the past years and the average level of political intelligence” (275). To that end, the local “social centers” movement became an extension of military propaganda efforts (Mattson 105–15). Likewise, at the request of the federal Center for Public Information (CPI), professors in the nascent speech communication discipline trained “Four-Minute Men” to encourage political support for the war (Van Wye 368–69). In time, CPI messengers were trained to promote American pluralism as a superficial foil to an evil “them” in Germany. For instance, in a bulletin entitled “What Our Enemy Really Is,” the CPI urged speakers to claim the “German autocratic government has twisted the ideas of the whole nation on a matter of political morals” and thus posed a threat to all democracy (Committee 4). Although engaged in a sort of civic practice, speakers seldom participated in meaningful deliberations about the ethicality of the war (Danisch). In part due to the nativist fervor wrought by wartime propaganda, a new cynicism began to set in among educational elites. Just a year after America’s entrance in the war, Dewey wrote of his own naiveté: “The increase of intolerance of discussion to the point of religious bigotry has been so rapid that years might have passed” (293). Evacuated of its pluralistic emphasis, the wartime language of “Americanization” morphed into the postwar xenophobia that sustained restrictive immigration laws and an ascendant Ku Klux Klan (Steele 59–60). The democratic enthusiasms of progressivism dissipated, as “the idea of ‘the people,’ good and educable, gave way to a concept of ‘the masses,’ brutish and volatile” (Kennedy 90).

The Progressive Era would not mark the last time rhetorical educators placed their hopes in national civic trends only to facilitate their own later despair. In many ways, contemporary rhetoricians have experienced a similar form of whiplash in the transition from Barack Obama to Donald Trump. From his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech to his 2008 presidential victory, Obama defined himself through his ability to ironically transcend the rancorous partisans of “red America” and “blue America” (Steudeman 77–88). This oratory appealed to some of the deepest pieties of scholars who study rhetoric and deliberation, leading many to hopefully praise Obama’s model of “a revitalized public reason” (Rowland 717; see also Frank 623; Gaffey 420). Even as Obama tried to usher in a post-partisan era, though, his very political identity was symbiotic with a culture of partisanship. The certainty of his ironic conclusions required treating partisan “sub-certainties as neither true nor false, but *contributory*” to his own perspective

(Burke, *Grammar* 513, emphasis in the original). In affirming the essential symmetry and equivalence of political positions, Obama's vision had significant consequences once publicly ratified by the 2008 election. Most obviously, it sustained a media environment that demanded a fair hearing for "both sides" of every issue—a situation conducive to the false equivalences that later benefitted Donald Trump (Patterson). More subtly, partisan figures could adopt Obama's dual position (both ironic observer and Democrat) to situate themselves as above the fray even as they took part in it. In this way, the Tea Party movement promoted itself as an "independent" force against Democrats and Republicans, even as it pursued a far-right policy agenda (Skocpol and Williamson 138–54). In short, Obama's (and our) commitment to a model of reasonable people working out differences created the conditions for demagoguery to flourish under cover of irony.

Nowhere did Obama's ironic formula and deliberative commitments do more to enable demagogic backlash than in connection to racism. In his "A More Perfect Union" address in Philadelphia, Obama defused controversy over remarks by his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, by emulating the conventions of a reasonable, intimate dialogue between "both sides of the conversation" (Miller 360). As with Obama's other performances, rhetoricians commended the speech for attempting to improve democratic life through strategies of polyvocality, mythic transcendence, and balanced juxtaposition (Isaksen 469; Rowland and Jones 127; Terrill 381). Yet, in stepping back to examine America's racial history at a dialectical remove, the speech "deflected attention from or denied the operation of racism" as a force in American culture (Enck-Wanzer 28; see also Dilliplane 138–39; McDuffie; Utley and Heyse). Consider, for instance, Obama's claim that he could "no more disown [Reverend Wright] than I can my white grandmother"—someone he loved but who had also "uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe." Equating his grandmother's remarks with Wright's, with no regard for either mentor's power, racial contingency, or social context, ignored "the unequally distributed character of risk in society"—a recipe for legitimating a demagogic politics of victimhood among the powerful (Johnson 247). Worse, by reframing racism as a question of personal character, Obama sanctioned a moral ecology that subsumes one's complicity in racist structures to one's character in private encounters. If a culture accepts the premises of Obama's speech, it takes only a subtle adjustment for it to accept Donald Trump's claim there were "very fine people on both sides" of a white supremacist clash with anti-fascist protestors (Keneally).

Even accounting for the unprecedented constraints Obama faced, we should be sobered by the legacy of his rhetoric and our collective response to it. Obama's legacy illustrates how idealizing balanced, fair, reasonable discourse as the antidote to demagoguery can lull us into a sense of complacency. Excited to see deliberative practices revived, we forget the ways demagoguery operates within precisely the models of civic education that we endorse. Parasitic on the ethical norms associated

with democratic practice, demagoguery has a twisting, duplicitous relationship to the tradition of rhetorical education. Demagoguery weaponizes the liberal and republican languages of justice, identity, equality, and virtue in ways subversive to the best intentions of those intellectual traditions. It invokes the protections of free speech to denounce and deny others' expressions of free speech. It seeks democratic legitimacy for efforts to disrupt and dismantle democratic institutions. It misuses the language of "thought police" and "doublespeak" toward Orwellian ends. It summons the specter of the "demagogue" to justify the demagogic ends of exclusion and expulsion. It cites deliberative norms to sound reasonable, even sophisticated, while undermining reasoned discourse. It cultivates victimhood to condemn the truly victimized. It neutralizes techniques of subaltern resistance to defend structures of privilege, patriarchy, and white supremacy. In an era of demagoguery, then, rhetorical educators must interrogate the affective investments encouraged by rhetorical pedagogy, whereby students transfer their emotional attachments to "the process of debate itself" (Greene and Hicks, "Debating Conviction" 156). Only by acknowledging and interrogating those investments can we respond to the cooptation of our pedagogy—and avoid exercising that pedagogy toward demagogic ends ourselves.

An Attitudinal Reorientation for Rhetorical Pedagogy

I have spent our recent political nightmare reflecting on teaching practices that I fear, in retrospect, directly or indirectly contributed to a culture of demagoguery. What if my efforts to forge healthy skepticism toward partisan sources furthered an atmosphere of distrust in which propaganda thrives? What if debate training in *dissoi logoi* primed students to accept false equivalences from public officials? What if teaching the power of emotionally infused personal narrative enabled privileged students to later assume disingenuous postures of victimhood? What if teaching logical fallacies merely gave students an all-too-convenient way to dismiss discomfiting views? I have realized that beneath each of these questions rests an untenable presupposition—that it would be feasible, or even desirable, to craft a rhetorical pedagogy completely immune to demagogic cooptation. Demagoguery evolves too rapidly for any inoculation to work against it. An effective response does not entail abandoning any particular practice, nor does it require embracing any particular program. Rather, it requires the cultivation of a pedagogic attitude attuned to the ways demagoguery infiltrates democratic *praxis*. I use the term "attitude" here in Kenneth Burke's sense, as a set of infinitesimal adjustments to mood or mindset that anticipate action (*Grammar* 242–46). Aware of the pitfalls outlined here, the attitude I propose underwrites a nimble pedagogy capable of deftly renegotiating classroom dynamics as demagogic tendencies emerge. Aiming to defuse resentment, guard against logics of exclusion, and open room for spontaneity, this attitude—however imperfect—offers ways of responding to the strictures of a demagogic culture.

In crafting a pedagogical program designed “to make demagoguery more difficult,” Burke was particularly attuned to the problem of resentment and the “unintended byproducts” of advancing a pedagogical goal too strongly (“Linguistic” 286). To avoid that form of backfire, he counseled the cultivation of a preparatory attitude in students that teachers could return to in moments of heated exchange. Attuned to the emotional atmosphere of the classroom, educators would then “step to one side ... stopping to analyze an exhortation precisely at the moment when the exhortation would otherwise set us to swinging violently” (“Linguistic” 284). Knowing when to make this pivot, and being prepared to make it, can help move students toward reflective practice without first ratifying their resentments. In my own classroom, I have primed students for this pivot by targeting resentment’s greatest weakness: its sheer predictability. Built on “the replaying of an injury in memory or imagination,” resentment relies on the retelling of a causal story about the source of in-group problems (Engels 157). To intervene in this narrative cycle, I begin semesters of argumentation classes by studying Deborah Stone’s account of the complex ways causal narratives can be employed to explain public problems (206–18). Grappling with the myriad intentional, accidental, inhuman, and systemic causes of disasters like Hurricane Katrina, we develop a framework by which we can take Burke’s “step to the side” throughout the semester. Rather than seeking to diminish students’ extant modes of arguing, this technique steps back to consider those explanations as part of a larger puzzle. In a culture of demagoguery, I find this technique mitigates the impulse to scapegoating by highlighting the complexity of social problems. This approach does not attempt to suppress resentment, but rather seeks to disperse corrosive sentiments over a wider range of explanations to dilute the emotional lifeblood of demagoguery.

Beyond defusing a politics of resentment, a pedagogic attitude attuned to demagogic backfire will gird against the exclusionary tendencies of our academic traditions. From the start, that means dislodging ourselves from the assumption that our role is to prepare an unready public. As Rancière argues, this premise predicates social relations on an assumption of inequality. Rather than “proving that all intelligence is equal,” he counsels educators to see “what can be done under that supposition” (*Ignorant* 46). Crucially, affirming the equality of intelligence is not a matter of accepting a “neo-liberal freedom, where everyone is free to articulate their own ‘story’” (Biesta 69). Rather, it entails creating “an *interruption*” that jostles educational participants from suppositions of superiority or inferiority (69, emphasis in the original). Partway through my course in argumentation, I sought this type of interruption by sending students to a wretched hive of bunk and demagoguery—the Internet. As preparation, students read from Patricia Roberts-Miller’s *Demagoguery and Democracy* and learned precautions for engaging in political discussion online. They then reviewed Twitter conversations about current events with the deceptively simple goal: to persuade a stranger

engaged in demagoguery to concede *one single claim*. Eliminating pedagogic distance between teacher and student, the exercise assigned a grade simply for attempting to engage another human, in all their contingent unpredictability. The more meaningful step came next, when students wrote reflections evaluating whether their own persuasive efforts shifted into a demagogic mode by, for instance, dismissing interlocutors for out-group membership. Conducting “argumentative autopsies” of exchanges that went awry, students reconsidered their dispositions toward their discursive partners. In turn, the assignment helped to demonstrate how even students versed in formal argumentative skills are not immune to sliding into logics of exclusion.

Even as we inculcate self-awareness about demagogic tendencies, we also must guard against overcommitments to specific deliberative or rhetorical forms to foster democratic ideals. That means, in part, interrogating how we construct “democracy” itself. Critiquing theorists who invoke radical conceptions of democracy, Ralph Cintrón explains that “democratic rhetorics ... overproduce expectations and desires that generate unrealistic claims of equality, freedom, and rights that are difficult for any social order to realize and manage” (113). As a result, he says, the *energeia* of democracy is often appropriated toward causes of sustaining the coherence of the nation-state or the perpetuity of institutions. My response to Cintrón’s critique is to theorize demagoguery and democracy *together* to temper both the excesses of democratic rhetoric and the confluences of ideal and real. From this standpoint, demagoguery and democracy are reciprocal forces that operate through the same rhetorical and institutional structures. Realized in the same ways, they are thus constantly substituted, conflated, and renamed as one another. Adopting this stance means treating every attempt to bring democracy to life—be it through the oratorical simulation of racial dialogue, the democratic-republican model of the Constitution, or the format of switch-side debates—as always already infiltrated by demagoguery. In part, this suggestion is an admonition against making paeans to deliberation, civility, and reason without also prompting students to reflect on the potential abuses of those notions. More affirmatively, I urge us to discard practices as they become coopted and remain open to the unusual, the creative, and the contingent. Opening ourselves to new discursive forms, to playful variations, to violations of the rules, we may discover where and how our pedagogic routines become vulnerable to demagoguery. We may find that we, too, are unexceptional.

I am still grappling with what this adaptable anti-demagogic pedagogy would look like in practice. But I am taking a cue from the histories I have recounted here. It is telling that anxieties about demagoguery have been at their greatest in eras of new media technology, growing educational access, and a vast expansion of public participation. In each case, a massive body of electoral participants embraced outlets of information imbued with the glow of novelty, access, and discovery. Newly enfranchised audiences at pro-Jackson stump speeches,

pamphlet readers who took up arms against the Union, radio listeners tuning in to Father Coughlin, G.I. Bill-educated viewers of Joseph McCarthy, and avid retweeters of Alex Jones all shared in a sense of having uncovered vaunted information that, they believed, the vanguards of “older” media and institutions did not want heard. Fully acknowledging the racism, nativism, sexism, classism, bigotry, and other inegalitarian currents that attracted these audiences, there still seems to be something else to which they were drawn. Striving to break out of a process of pedagogic stultification, to find new sources of information and new modes of participation, theirs was, and is, a spontaneity trying to breathe. Rhetoricians’ response, again and again, has been to try to slam Pandora’s Box closed. Perhaps this time, with Rancière, we should try something different: to seek to preserve democracy “in its mobility, its capacity to shift the sites and forms of participation ... [and] the continual renewal of the actors and of the forms of their actions” (*On the Shores* 60–61). At the same time, we must remember that demagoguery functions as democracy’s negative, sharing in its potential for mobility, transformation, and renewal.

On Loving the Poorly Educated

This essay has examined how the rhetoric of civic education can itself beget, become, or abet demagogic discourse. In response, it offered an attitude attuned to the reception of rhetorical pedagogy in a culture of demagoguery. Embracing such an attitude—one “versatile, sporadic—and founded on trust” (Rancière, *On the Shores* 61)—requires a leap of faith in an era when our belief in fellow-humans, democracy, and our own pedagogy has eroded. I counsel an attitudinal reorientation, rather than a wholesale programmatic change, to accommodate our inability to step surefootedly in a precarious political moment. In “the dancing of an attitude” there is room for complexity, uncertainty, and contradiction (Burke, *Philosophy* 9). An attitude can encompass a sobriety about what rhetorical pedagogues can truly accomplish during our three fleeting hours of class each week. An attitude can contain doubt that the system of mass education could ever fully dispense with logics of meritocratic exclusion (Balibar 7). And an attitude can include a realistic assessment of how institutional and power dynamics constrain the political potential of the classroom (Eberly 172). By navigating between these stances and more hopeful ones, between postures of reticence and resilience, we can best withstand the demagogic promise of “stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric” (Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery* 33). Teachers of rhetoric may rightfully feel dejected and dismayed by the ways our lessons have been taken up by a broader culture. We may also still stubbornly persist in believing that teaching students to be reflexive, ethical, empathetic, and critical can help us escape our political hell. Feeling these contradictions, not knowing which way is

forward, let us refuse to stop moving. Let us take up the improvisational dance of an anti-demagogic attitude.

The alternative to this attitudinal reorientation is to fall into old patterns that beguiled civic educators in the past, patterns we have already begun to relive. After winning the Nevada caucuses in February 2016, Donald Trump delivered one of his many news cycle-consuming off-the-cuff lines. “We won with highly educated. We won with poorly educated. I love the poorly educated. We’re the smartest people, we’re the most loyal people” (Garcia par. 3). Across social media, commentators fixated on “I love the poorly educated” as Trump’s accidental admission that his voters were ignorant—and that he took a certain elation in exploiting that ignorance. This interpretation misses the appeal of Trump’s argument. Noting his support among the “highly” *and* the “poorly” educated, Trump goes on to collapse the hierarchy of education altogether. Intelligence, he implies, is not a condition for his love. Being “educated” does not make one smart—being “the most loyal people” does. A dangerous and authoritarian premise, Trump’s statement nonetheless offered something to the less educated that the culture of the education society has refused to provide: an affirmation of belonging, dignity, and love. The flabbergasted response to Trump’s comment, I suspect, helped confirm civic resentments among those shut out of our educational system. The response also carried a more troubling connotation: that one *should not* love the poorly (or less, or un-) educated—that they do not deserve it. While our charge, as educators, is to teach others, I fear the implications of accepting the denigration of those held back by the formal school system. I fear what it means for us to accept that we are positioned to make such a judgment. I hope, instead, that we remain vigilant about how all democratic traditions can succumb to demagoguery—even our own.

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