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13 Against Decorous Civility

Acting as if You Live in a Democracy

M.J. Braun

> [T]he inability to link the reading of the word with the world, if not combated, will further exacerbate already feeble democratic institutions and unjust, asymmetrical power relations that characterize the hypocritical nature of contemporary democracy.
>
> (Donaldo Macedo)

The US university, long touted as embodying the democratic principles of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas, can be a dangerous place indeed for a rhetorician to teach and practice the political arts of democracy. The university certainly qualifies as one of Macedo's "feeble democratic institutions" that reproduces the "asymmetrical power relations that characterize the hypocritical nature of contemporary democracy" (x). The sovereign power exercised at every level of the administrative hierarchy, the panoptic techniques of tenuring faculty, and the rhetoric of decorous civility required to obtain and maintain the privileges attached to tenure are extremely effective in producing the cautious timidity with which so many academics make their way through the highly politicized environment of higher education. Rather than spaces for the free exchange of ideas, academic environments would be better characterized as terrains requiring careful, oh so careful, tiptoeing: the classroom, the halls of our departments, department and university committee meetings, faculty senates, and those unsolicited spaces we create as we work for institutional change. The price of academic freedom, for the untenured, is a six- or seven-year period of maintaining decorous civility: that's normal, that's expected. Of course, the disciplining is unevenly applied. Men are routinely allowed to behave more assertively or agonistically than women during the tenure process. Tenured faculty, university administrators, and chairs will tolerate all sorts of eccentricities from "star" professors and big grant writers, but are able to create intolerable working environments for those who step out of line, rendering the free exchange of ideas a myth for many.

These techniques create professors who become adept at self-policing and are either cynical or unconcerned about the governance of the university. Many professors learn to stay out of the university politics that affect the overall delivery of education, as they learn that the only political realm acceptable for

them to enter is the backdoor politics of self-interest required to further one's research, one's department, or one's career. In this way, returning to Macedo, the academic's "word" becomes divorced from "the world" in that her contribution to knowledge-making is confined to the privatized space of scholarly production. She is discouraged from engaging in the material and embodied discourses out of which the elite discourse of scholarship is distilled. But, separating the "word" from the "world," as Macedo understands it, is particularly hard for those who profess the discipline of rhetoric, the core project of which is the highly volatile, contradictory sphere of probable truth, argument, and decision-making. As Gerald Hauser has argued, rhetoric's "base" is general education and carries out its core project through a pedagogy that "strongly contributes to the health of a civic culture" (qtd. in Zarefsky 32). Donna Haraway has examined how the separation of disciplinary knowledge production from the material and multivocal world in which it is produced affects the truth value of scholarly claims. She advocates that academics adopt a "feminist objectivity" that "allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (181). However, through techniques of governance and knowledge-making, the university confines the agency of professors to a privatized niche in which the messy intrusion of the world will not, for the most part, disrupt the business at hand.

Assumptions about good teaching are also antithetical to teaching and practicing the political arts of democracy. Professors are supposed to maintain an ethos of neutrality, a strange dictum given the charge that they "profess." As Haraway has argued, because all knowledge emerges from the situatedness of its production, knowledge always participates in the struggle for power. This point is not lost on some of the progressive proponents of the relatively new movement to recover the democratic mission of the US university, a recovery effort that rhetoricians, given their discipline's core project of civic engagement, should be leading. Echoing Michael Halloran's argument over two decades before, chief theorists of the American Democracy Project,[1] Colby et al., have pointed out that the model of the US university that developed in the twentieth century (which is frighteningly careening towards its logical conclusion in the twenty-first) has *prevented* students from developing a civic identity. They argue that a student develops a civic identity by becoming an "individual [who] recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own" (17). However, considering the profoundly anti-democratic techniques through which the university makes policies that affect the delivery and content of education and through which the professor-*ethos* is forged, teaching rhetoric as the art of democratic practice will certainly run counter to the very culture of the university and the political economy it serves.

Linda Brodkey's account of the 1990 controversy over a multicultural composition course at the University of Texas at Austin illustrates how the university's profoundly anti-democratic institutional culture functions, and, particularly, how dangerous the university, acting in the interest of the political

economy it serves, considers the teaching of the art of democratic practice. Brodkey was part of a group of rhetoricians who redesigned the first-year writing course to help students develop civic literacy by studying the rhetoric of policy-making. Specifically, the course would have required students to "read and write critically about 'difference' in the context of antidiscrimination law and discrimination law suits" (236). At the insistence of a group of fifty-six UT professors, however, all of whom were members of or influenced by the neo-conservative National Association of Scholars (NAS), the dean of liberal arts ordered the postponement of this course shortly before it was set to begin, an act of profound cowardice that denied the course designers agency over the curriculum and the disciplinary scholarship that informed it. Following the dean's intervention, in another act of cowardice, the university president acquiesced to a campaign in the local and national media to generate fear about the new program and canceled the course. Ironically, Brodkey explains, the journalists, who had had a field-day fabricating "evidence" against the composition course, would not have passed the rigorous standards for constructing arguments that the canceled course sought to teach to first-year students. A journalist later told Brodkey that he filled his article with blatant lies because, after all, like all good journalists, he just needed a good hook. Even more ironic, under the pretense of not offending the shared values of the citizens who were whipped into a public frenzy by the media, the university hierarchy had canceled the course that had been supported by both an overwhelming majority of the English department and the faculty as a whole.

In UT's case, a relatively tiny group of fifty-six professors, acting according to the ideology of the neo-conservative NAS, successfully defeated the majority of UT's faculty and the principle of academic freedom. It was later disclosed that the university president had actually decided to cancel the course at the behest of the fifty-six professors days before the dean ever ordered its postponement. The postponement, that is to say, was merely a ruse that allowed the witch hunt to proceed in the press to make the cancellation appear to have been demanded by the citizens, a deception that constitutes tyrannical governance. The incident illustrates how rhetoricians may run afoul of the administration, not for failing to contribute to knowledge-making in the field, but precisely because they have attempted to contribute. Brodkey and the other rhetoricians who designed the course had sought to bring "the world" of multiple and contending knowledges into the writing curriculum; they had engaged in rigorous scholarly study of rhetorical theory in order to design the course. However, the rhetoricians' right to profess their disciplinary knowledge was roundly rejected by the university administration.

Twenty years after Brodkey's experience, the political environment in which professors work has worsened. The NAS's neo-conservative, twisted sister, the American Association of Trustees and Alumni (AATA), has made its case for its Students' Bill of Rights before the US Congress and many state legislatures. In the double-speak that is an oft-used rhetorical strategy of the neo-conservatives, the Students' Bill of Rights is designed to threaten liberal to

leftist professors' right to engage in the free exchange of ideas. Although the bill was not passed in the US Congress, it has gained support in state legislatures. In March 2004, the Georgia State Senate passed the "Academic Bill of Rights" (Simmons). Following the strategy of the NAS in 1990, Donald Lazere has demonstrated, the AATA first created public alarm by identifying liberal and leftist professors as a threat to national security and then incited state congresspersons to protect the populace from this treasonous cabal, creating the culture of fear across many campuses. Although Henry Giroux asserts that this culture of fear is not strictly a post-9/11 phenomenon, nor is it an aberration from an idyllic, democratic past, the accelerated pace of demonization through which a small minority of ideologues are defeating majority sentiments and circumventing longstanding democratic ideals creates a profoundly anti-democratic current that has gained hegemony in present-day US culture.

As rhetoricians move to strengthen the presence of rhetorical studies in the university,[2] we may find ourselves on the front line of defending democracy in this highly charged and inhospitable culture of fear. This will certainly be the case the more rhetoricians profess a democratic model of discourse for which Macedo calls. Such practice will inevitably bring ourselves, our students, and the colleagues with whom we collaborate into opposition to, and indeed make us a target of, the university's institutional regimes as administrators comply with the increasingly anti-democratic culture. I agree with Giroux that neo-conservatism is not an aberration of the US democratic system, nor is its political program anachronistic. Rather, neo-conservatism is the most appropriate political program to serve the ends of the global, neoliberal economy. Because the state always manages the twists and turns of social disruption to maintain and advance the property relations of any given economy, neo-conservative politics, with its drive to privatize the public, dismantle the social welfare tradition, and deregulate the manufacturing and financial sectors, embodies the neoliberal economic current in the US's imperial project. As such, neo-conservative politics, grounded in neoliberal economics, is profoundly opposed to rhetoric's project of teaching the arts of democratic engagement.

The neoliberal economic imaginary is partially constructed as a religious faith in Adam Smith's invisible hand, the hand of free exchange that subordinates politics to economics. The struggle for social equality and personal freedom, according to Smith, will most effectively develop if the capitalist market is given free rein. But neoliberalism, unlike Smith's free-market model, conceives of the political as antithetical, not subordinate to the economic. In this imaginary, the values of democracy—equality, freedom, and justice—must not be negotiated in the political sphere; in fact, any attempts to do so will merely interfere with the circulation of capital. Its anti-democratic character derives from its utter rejection of citizens' political agency. As institutional cultures have adjusted to neoliberal economics, the logic and techniques of neo-conservative politics, a politics that aims to exclude everything but the bottom line from our shared values, develops with it. While it is always true that a society's "democratic" character is severely curtailed if, upon entering any of the institutions within that democracy, the citizen must leave her democratic identity at the door, it is particularly egregious when those institutions that have been set aside for the practice of multivocality enforce a code of civility that corresponds to the univocal logic of capitalism.

Academic disciplines have also adjusted to the neoliberal imaginary. In *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness*, Aune argues that the rise of neoliberal economics has been accompanied by the rise of rational choice theory in the social sciences, which has had an extremely debilitating effect on scholarship. The concept of rational choice was born in the early literature of political economy. According to capitalist theory, Aune recounts, price is determined rationally because human beings are rational actors who each calculate what is useful for their own self-interest. In this way, the ideology of individualism is inextricably tied to the rationality of price. But, Aune contends, "[m]ethodological individualism and rational choice have been transposed from the theory of pricing in microeconomics to economics as a whole, and thence to sociology, political science, and law" (20). He demonstrates that rational choice theory in all of these scholarly disciplines naturalizes a doctrine of neoliberal economics known as "the perverse-effect doctrine." According to this central tenet of neoliberal theory, any political move to regulate markets will result in a perverse, negative consequence; therefore, any interference into free-market capitalism by the democratic polity is a perversion of the rationality of both the market and the individuals who are its rational actors. The extension of rational choice theory across the social sciences has had a seriously constraining effect on rhetoric as the hallmark of democratic practice. When rhetors warrant arguments on ethical and humanist grounds that don't correspond to the rationality of neoliberalism, which is bound to the ethics of efficiency, expediency, and the sovereign individual, these arguments are automatically dismissed as perversely disruptive to civility.

Because political agency is at the heart of rhetoric's project, rhetoricians who engage in the types of arguments that acknowledge humanist ethics may very likely place their careers in jeopardy to the extent to which they are perceived as speaking outside of neoliberal decorum and civility. With this in mind, more and more rhetoricans may find themselves dealing with the question: Is it worth losing one's job or losing one's comfort zone in the university in the interest of practicing the art of a democratic "reading of the word with the world"? Of course there is a story behind this question, and the time to tell it is now, although that telling will be brief.

When I began a job as director of composition at a small, regional university in the south, I found an extremely dedicated group of instructors, adjuncts, and graduate students, most of whom were ready to break, or had already broken with, traditional ways of teaching composition. This was fortunate since I was told by the hiring committee and the chair that the department had created my line specifically to find someone who would bring the composition program into the twentieth-first century. I had been very clear in my application materials, as well as in my scholarly presentation and interviews, that I was interested in

abandoning all formalistic approaches to composition and replacing them with a rhetorical approach that valued the reading and writing of public texts as they actually circulate in the world. The Marxist theoretical grounding of my scholarship and my past experiences as an activist both in and out of the university were disclosed by me and welcomed by them. In fact, I was introduced to the entire faculty as a communist, a comment meant to be a compliment of the highest order.

In my opening lecture to the faculty, I laid out my vision for a rhetorical approach to writing instruction, a vision that linked language to subject formation, public texts, and political agency. By the end of the fall semester, almost all of the composition teachers were voluntarily engaging in study, discussion, and planning for a spring pilot course that would begin to carry out the new mission of the program. The program, according to the text of the collaboratively written Mission Statement, acknowledged that "democracy is best sustained by an educated and informed public versed in the practices of critical perception and expression" and prepares students to be "critical citizens"[3] by engaging in writing projects that are "based on real-world genres rather than genres manufactured specifically and exclusively for the writing classroom."

The composition committee also received a charge from the chair to write a report to the president, dean, and provost making the case that effective teaching of composition would not only entail bringing the program theoretically into the twenty-first century but improving the working conditions of the primarily contingent faculty who teach in the program. The 77-page report contained a theoretical justification for the new mission of the program, three labor studies conducted by members of the composition committee, a student survey of responses to the goals of the pilot course, and specific recommendations for improving the terms and conditions of work for the contingent faculty. The report argued that effective writing instruction required a stable faculty whose working conditions allowed them to study rhetorical theory as they developed pedagogies in keeping with the program's democratic mission. The final report was praised by the chair and sent to the administration. However, long before the final draft of the report was turned in, my prospects for a future in the department began to unravel.

Along with the exciting atmosphere of study and collaboration among the composition faculty as we carried out the democratic aims of the pilot program, the teachers began to also think and act as critical citizens. One of the instructors, a member of the composition committee, had done extensive study of the adjunct issue, was familiar with Equity Week, the nation-wide movement to struggle for equitable working conditions in higher education,[4] and had done studies of adjuncts' working conditions in the past. In response to her interest, the composition committee organized a showing of *Degrees of Shame*, a film exposing the conditions of life and work of the "freeway-flyer" faculty. We invited contingent and permanent faculty as well as the president, dean, and provost to the screening in the interest of opening up a deliberative dialogue. To our surprise, around thirty people from various departments came to the

showing, as did the president. After the film, many of the adjuncts told the stories of their hardships as well as their dedication to teaching. As one story fed into the other, the feel of the room shifted from a group of individuals to a group of people sharing collective experiences and goals. The president then stood up to speak. He acknowledged people's experiences and, after being asked, stated he was willing to help set up a task force to make recommendations for improvements. The practice of democracy exercised through democratic deliberation seemed to be proceeding.

About two weeks later, what we thought would become the "task force" met in the president's conference room, a group composed of graduate teaching assistants, adjuncts, instructors, and me, a tenure-track professor. But what ensued was not a meeting; rather, the president and provost lectured us for almost thirty minutes about economic realities. No one had been asked to introduce themselves and no one was ever asked to speak. We were told that a series of dire consequences would most likely result if the administration decided to act on the issue we had raised. An instructor line or two may be created, but the adjuncts would lose their jobs. All instructors' loads would be increased from four to five classes per semester, and the tenure and tenure-track faculty would also have increased loads, upper-division courses could be cut, and the professors would be redeployed to teach composition. When I finally and politely, decorously, almost obsequiously, raised my hand and stated that we appreciate all of this information but that we'd like to shift the topic to a discussion of the questionable ethics behind the working conditions of the contingent faculty, the word encountered the world, and the president's fist hit the table, leaving decorous civility behind. As his voice got louder, I sat there remembering a piece of advice the dean had given me in a discussion we had about the university's reliance on exploited labor. She advised me to argue the case on economic grounds, and never talk about ethics. A few weeks later I was told by my faculty mentor that I should concentrate on getting tenure, stop raising the labor issue, and learn that I should not expect to be able to live according to my principles. Clearly, I was the one who was considered to have broken rhetorical codes. The story does not end there, but, in the interest of decorous civility, that is all I am disclosing.

Some of my literature colleagues have commented that, for a rhetorician, I don't seem to know how to speak appropriately for specific situations. However, after careful consideration of key questions in my field, I had carefully chosen my words at the meeting with the president.

I have studied and compared theories of democracy, ethics, political economy, disciplinarity, and tyranny, to name a few, precisely because all of these things form the stuff of rhetorical studies. I have studied rhetorics of compliance and rhetorics of resistance. My timid reference to ethics in a meeting with the president hardly serves as much of an example of resistance. When I think about the intersections of rhetoric and democracy, I think about the work of rhetoricans to whom I am indebted, theories that make cases for a democratic agonal rhetoric (Mouffe), for conflict (Jarratt; Roberts-Miller), for arguespeak

(Graff), for resistance to institutional discourses (Dyer-Witheford), for undermining the rhetoric of rational choice and the new realism (Aune; Beer and Hariman), for developing critical citizen identities (Eberly), for speaking from a position of ethics (Colby et al.; Katz), for materialist pedagogy (France), for recognizing the political nature of all text (Weisser), and for not being afraid to speak to the king ("The Declaration of Independence").

My decision to disrupt the direction in which the provost and president were taking the conversation was informed by solid rhetorical theory. My delivery consisted of a civil tone of voice, but my argument was not confined to the *topos* of capitalist logic. When I write a scholarly article on rhetoric, or when I design a syllabus around rhetorical studies, it is considered legitimate use of my disciplinary knowledge. If, however, I apply theories of rhetoric in the institution which pays me to produce it, I am considered by many to be a failure as a rhetor and, possibly, a poor "fit" in my institution. Most ironic, of course, was that I directed a program that promoted critical citizenship and asked students to speak and act in the world as if it counted, as if they lived in a democracy. At the same time, my own ability to speak and act on an issue that directly affects the success of this program and the lives of the people who teach in it was declared to be outside of the duties of my job. Grappling with issues involving radical democratic theory is fine as long as this grappling is not made flesh. It is fine, in other words, to profess democratic rhetoric as long as you don't practice it.

I am unconvinced, however, that I should not conduct my life as if I lived in a democracy.

Notes

1 The American Democracy Project was promulgated by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). In response to their promotional materials, the presidents of about 150 state colleges and universities across the country signed up for the project and sent delegates from the upper levels of their administrations to the first organizational meeting in July 2003. The top-down nature of AASCU's organizing methods can be explained by the ambitious goal of the project, which is nothing less than reinstating citizenship education as the university's stated mission, something that can not be accomplished unless university presidents and provosts are on board. For the first year of its work, interested administrators and professors were asked to participate in a "national conversation" centered around the book, *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*, coauthored by Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens, whose research was supported by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. This book, therefore, was chosen to be the theoretical foundation of the project.

2 See for example the Rhetorical Path Series in the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, and especially the summer 2004 special edition of RSQ, a report on the first conference of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies, an organization created for the specific purpose of strengthening, in the words of David Zarefsky, "the institutional and social goals of rhetoric."

3 We borrowed this term from Rosa Eberly. Eberly defines the critical citizen as one who "produces discourses about issues of common concern from an ethos of citizen first and foremost—not as expert or spokesperson for a workplace or as member of a club or organization" (1).

4 For information on Equity Week, see www.aaup.org/AAUP/issues/contingent/cewpage.htm.

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14 You Can't Get There from Here

Higher Education, Labor Activism, and Challenges of Neoliberal Globalization

Kevin Mahoney

This chapter has its roots in two related aspects of my professional context. First, I have been teaching composition for about fifteen years if you count my six years as a graduate teaching assistant. One persistent and defining issue of the field of composition and rhetoric has been and continues to be the "service" role of the first-year composition course and, by extension, the composition instructor (I have not taught speech or communications courses, but I imagine the same pressures exist, especially when it comes to required general education courses). Within the walls of academe and in the broader public this service role has usually meant that the first-year composition course is expected to train students to write the "standard" academic essay. Non-composition faculty and administrators expect(ed) that once a student passed through one or two semesters of college composition, she or he should know how to write a decent sentence, express themselves in standard American English, be proficient in grammar and spelling, and demonstrate their skill in proper citation.

This "service" expectation has some pretty powerful advocates as well. In a recent opinion piece posted to his *New York Times* blog, noted literary theorist and legal scholar Stanley Fish notes that:

> A few years ago, when I was grading papers for a graduate literature course, I became alarmed at the inability of my students to write a clean English sentence. They could manage for about six words and then, almost invariably, the syntax (and everything else) fell apart. I became even more alarmed when I remembered that these same students were instructors in the college's composition program. What, I wondered, could possibly be going on in their courses?
>
> (Fish)

Fish suggests that after he learned what was actually going on in his students' composition courses, he "came to the conclusion that unless writing courses focus exclusively on writing they are a sham, and [he] advised administrators to insist that all courses listed as courses in composition teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else" (Fish).