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Demagoguery, Democratic Dissent, and "Re- visioning" Democracy

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I applaud Professor Roberts-Miller’s call for a new look at demagoguery. Rather than engage in particular observations and arguments attending Professor Roberts-Miller’s call, I would like to begin with her closing remarks: “I am not claiming I 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.”¹

To my mind, one of the most important implications in Professor Roberts-Miller’s essay is that a refocused agenda on so-called “demagogic” rhetorical practices and products may give scholars and public alike a better handle on “deliberative democracy.”² While she provides a credible account of why rhetoricians may have turned from studies focusing on demagoguery, she also indicates that scholars in other fields seem to have a growing interest precisely because such studies have great promise in advancing our knowledge of democratic deliberation.³ One place to begin, however, is to probe some of the existing rhetorical literature for helpful critiques of discursive formations that might point more clearly to exactly how rhetoricians have *already* contributed to the discussion of discursive democracy.

Professor Roberts-Miller indicated earlier in her essay that part of the dilemma associated with sparse treatments of demagoguery can actually be traced back to my 1989 essay on Louis Farrakhan.⁴ She laments, “It is notable, however, the extent to which this scholarly project has lapsed; journals in rhetoric show few or no articles since Steven R. Goldzwig’s 1989 piece on Farrakhan.”⁵ While there is some truth to this observation, I think the exceptions to this generalization are important and naming them is actually one way of acknowledging and advancing Professor Roberts-Miller’s call.

In particular, I believe that current ongoing attempts to understand folks who have been labeled by scholars and publics alike as “demagogues” are helping us realize new ways of interpreting such rhetors, advancing our knowledge of oppositional rhetorics and, ultimately, our understanding of the nuances of our emerging rhetorical democracy. In the brief space allotted for this response,

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I would like to give some examples of current scholarship that support this argument. While the following exemplars are not meant to be exhaustive nor necessarily representative of an ongoing major trend in current scholarship, they seem to me to be demonstrative of the shifting character of the contemporary treatment of demagoguery. Traditional categories and assumptions are being reformed and retooled, if not supplanted by recent work.

Patricia A. Sullivan points to the need to pay special attention to the unique contours of African American rhetoric to avoid misinterpreting its thrust and intent. She indicates that during the 1988 presidential campaign, media coverage of Jesse Jackson's bid for the presidency "was greeted with frustration by media representatives and political pundits."⁶ These opinion leaders attributed to Jackson those characteristics we often associate with demagogues and demagoguery, "charg[ing] that he was overly emotional, dishonest, and vague during presentations on the campaign trail."⁷ By rereading Jackson through the culture-specific lens of African American patterns of signification, those negative public assessments seem much less convincing and more likely a case of misinterpretation. Using as her case study Jackson's Democratic National Convention address "Common Ground and Common Sense," Sullivan demonstrates conclusively that Jackson employed a "speakerly text," which was ripe with the "double-voiced words and double-voiced discourse" associated with various forms of African American signification.⁸ In Sullivan's account, simple assessments of demagogic practices are rendered problematic. For example, "'Lying' within the context of the black oral tradition does not necessarily connote dishonesty or insincerity."⁹ Indeed, "from the standpoint of African-American patterns of signification, [Jackson] was using 'figurative discourse,' or symbolically adapting his story for the audience."¹⁰ Thus, the "truth" of the narrative lies in its symbolic resonance for the intended audience rather than in any particular truth-telling "in a traditional sense."¹¹ In like manner, charges of being "overly emotional" are conclusions often made by whites when they are exposed to African American discourse, but those judgments are not necessarily shared by black audiences who may be more interested in a rhetor's ability to ground his or her argument in "common sense and personal experience" through various forms of culture-based signification.¹² These kinds of differences do matter, especially in our attempt to interpret and understand the ongoing discourses of a democracy. Thus culture-specific address and its critical appreciation are dependent on the norms of the cultural contract in force at the time. Text, context, cultural contract, and norms for performance all play crucially interdependent roles in determining the quality, value, and ethicality of discursive practices.

The reinterpretation of the so-called "demagogue" also has increased our knowledge of protest rhetoric. Mark Lawrence McPhail's 1998 article on Louis Farrakhan in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* is a case in point.¹³ McPhail seeks

to amplify earlier work, including my own,¹⁴ through a key assumption: “The manner in which knowledge is conceptualized and articulated in protest rhetoric often mirrors and thus sustains the very values and norms it calls into question.”¹⁵ In that light, McPhail employs complicity theory in an effort to extend our understanding of Farrakhan’s discourse. He argues that Farrakhan employs “racial reasoning in his public discourse” that “relies heavily on appeals laced with racial essentialism.” As a result, not only does Farrakhan’s discourse “undermine the powerful possibilities of his message of hope and atonement,” it tends to “reify and invigorate . . . conflict and division” which, in turn, has the “potential to reinscribe [negative] social norms, practices, and values.”¹⁶ In essence, McPhail finds Farrakhan fully engaged in a “politics of complicity” and argues persuasively against any assumption “that oppositional rhetorics are inherently emancipatory.”¹⁷ In Farrakhan, McPhail encounters a rhetor whose “appeal to racial essentialism, coupled with his exploitation of the discursive tension between white racism and black resistance, creates a climate of opposition in which the emancipatory possibilities of protest are obscured and undermined.”¹⁸ The larger lesson in the essay is that any “oppositional discourse that fails to interrogate its underlying assumptions too often remains complicit with those systems of oppression it calls into question.”¹⁹

John Arthos Jr. has reinterpreted Farrakhan’s rhetoric as well.²⁰ Like Sullivan’s treatment of Jesse Jackson, rather than writing Farrakhan off as a sophist or an ethically suspect rhetorician, Arthos claims that Farrakhan is also perhaps better interpreted within the framework of African American culture. In his analysis of Farrakhan’s discourse at the Million Man March, Arthos encounters a rhetor practicing the “shaman-trickster’s art of misdirection.” In that light, Farrakhan is evaluated as a “master of the art of ‘gettin ovuh,’” which was utilized in his call for “black atonement” as a key theme for the march. In issuing his call in a “double-voice,” Farrakhan assured the black community that “the most subversive meanings” of his message would indeed be theirs alone. Thus, Farrakhan offered his audiences the promise of spiritual delivery while performing the rites of the traditional role of priest-magician. In this instance, Farrakhan’s discourse wove a complex web, the totality of which was largely unseen by white audiences. In this way, Arthos, like others involved in the contemporary reinterpretation of those whose public discourse has been associated with the term “demagogue” by scholars and public alike, gives us a new lens with which to investigate an old topic. Therefore, demagoguery is receiving renewed attention, but the old explanations for so-called demagogic discourse are being reformulated. These reinterpretations do not necessarily remove rhetors from charges of demagoguery nor do they necessarily remove what can seem, to many at least, the production of prejudiced and divisive discursive action in the world. But what they can do and have done is to lend

additional insight into controversial and often marginalized rhetorical attempts. In the long run, I firmly believe, such studies enrich our understanding of the complexity of democratic discourse in the United States. As Arthos notes, “The Janus face of black identity continues to play an *important and productive* role in the negotiation of a hostile world. The Million Man March enacted in an exemplary fashion this very bifurcation.”²¹ In interrogating these kinds of tension points in our democratic republic, rhetoricians are engaged in the common scholarly community’s concern with democratic practices and products. By focusing on how and why different communities create space both to announce and to reinforce their vision of a better life, we help to unearth what has previously been unseen and unacknowledged; we prepare each other for future engagement and growth.

But it is not just in formal speeches delivered by publicly recognized representatives of our various political, social, and religious communities where our critical learning curve is now in full arc. Rhetoricians who place an emphasis on “vernacular discourse” or “everyday language” are finding and reinterpreting discursive texts that are helping us refrain from hasty summary judgments on various rhetors as perpetrators of “highly emotional” or ethically suspect discourse.²² We are finding that emotion and reason cannot be easily separated and that displays of emotion can be read in many subtle ways. Indeed, as Samuel McCormick has indicated, a focus on “everyday talk” can be useful in “enriching rhetorical studies by providing theorists and critics with access to paralinguistic markers such as hesitations, repetitions, repairs, intonations, and emphases” that “bring with them a powerful mode of analyzing the subtle, often fleeting displays of emotion and spur-of-the-moment decisions that riddle public speech [and] that are omitted when [merely] recording the orator’s words.”²³ McCormick suggests that a limited number of rhetorical scholars are now coming to understand that the speech text’s overall influence and force may be a matter that transcends individual persuasive prowess and implicates the “audience’s willingness to recycle and revise figural aspects of a speaker’s discourse in their everyday talk.”²⁴

The focus on “everyday talk” and the “vernacular” is in conformance with my 1998 call for “critical localism” as a potentially useful locus for rhetorical criticism.²⁵ A subsequent essay I coauthored with Patricia A. Sullivan enacts the call for critical localism by interrogating vernacular discursive practices that could be construed as demagogic without a careful and particularized reading.²⁶ Our study focused on local newspaper coverage of Milwaukee radio talk show host Michael McGee. McGee is a former Black Panther and Milwaukee alderman who has, over the years, often been labeled a “demagogue” for a number of discursive practices associated with his advocacy on behalf of poor inner-city African Americans. In particular, mainstream newspaper narratives

attacked McGee for his lack of “deportment” and “statesmanship,” and thus dismissed his more salient social and economic messages. We interpreted his messages through theories of African American discourse, which helped us as critics to reconfigure and apprehend the texts and contexts associated with his discursive practices in a fresh light. McGee mounted a counternarrative to resist mainstream narratives about himself and the local black community. In this study, then, persuasive tactics traditionally identified with demagoguery are reframed and reinterpreted as a unique African American form of democratic participation.

Much of what passed for demagoguery in the past is now being reinterpreted, reconfigured, and recast. For example, J. Michael Hogan and Glen Williams have challenged the “received view” of Huey Long as a southern demagogue. They argue that some people who have been “[u]ncomfortable with radical mass politics among poor, uneducated rural folk in the South” have employed the term “demagogue” as an epithet rather than a technical term. Indeed, for these authors, “Long’s reputation as a demagogue reflects a prejudice grounded not in ideology, but in an intellectual aversion to his indecorous, vituperative, and revivalistic brand of democratic populism.”²⁷ As Hogan and Williams remind the scholarly community, “To some, Long was a hero. To others, he was a demagogue. To embrace one label over the other is to oversimplify Long’s complex political persona. More than that, it is to take sides in the perennial class struggle between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots.’”²⁸

Even when scholars today reinterpret those whose credentials seem impeccable as demagogues, we learn not only about persuasive strategies and tactics, but also receive new and expansive views about our democracy and our culture. James Darsey’s treatment of Joseph McCarthy, for example, reconfigures McCarthyism’s “apocalyptic rhetoric as a response to the dissolution of community in America.”²⁹ In finding his “fantastic moment,” McCarthy’s discursive conspiratorial hyperbole points audiences toward dark forces, evil alliances, secret plots, and all manner of darkness “imposed from without.”³⁰ Nothing is what it seems and all manner of signs are darkly indeterminate. The sense of foreboding is palpable as the generic constraints of the fantastic exploit our fears and lead us to an ineluctable moment of “hesitation between belief and rejection, that moment suspended between the marvelous (the extraordinary, but ultimately credible) and the uncanny (the bizarre and the ultimately untrue).”³¹ In Darsey’s deft critical treatment, we find a richer and deeper explanation than mere charges of demagoguery.

Studies such as Hogan and Williams’s and Darsey’s are also recasting our knowledge of rhetorical democracy. As the so-called demagogic discursive practices of the past are reinterpreted by new scholarship with new theoretical and methodological assumptions and approaches, we are coming to

understand the rough-and-tumble of a liberal democracy in new ways. We are also giving voice to new dimensions of rhetorical activity that have been written off as inappropriate or anathema.

Rhetoricians who are directly involved in the process of interrogating and reclaiming rhetorical democracy are revivifying our traditional ways of knowing. Some are even turning to the ancients to enhance their reclamation project. For example, Karen E. Whedbee's examination of George Grote's influential nineteenth-century work *A History of Greece* reveals a vigorous defense of Cleon and the Athenian demagogues.³² Historical treatments of Greece written prior to Grote's work portrayed Cleon as the quintessential demagogue. As Whedbee makes clear, Cleon was treated as a dangerous "rabblouser" and "his name was synonymous with deception, flattery, and emotional manipulation of the 'ignorant Athenian mob.'" Grote's historical "defense of Athens depended in part on defending the demagogue and, by so doing, vindicating popular oratory as a legitimate means of political decision-making."³³ Like Hogan and Williams's protest of the treatment of Huey Long, Grote's revisionist ancient history rejects the view that Cleon was a demagogue. Indeed, according to Whedbee, for Grote, Cleon is better interpreted "as a political hero who used rhetoric to challenge the authority of wealth and unexamined tradition. Cleon's expressions of political dissent opened space for public deliberation and for rational consideration of alternative modes of thought and conduct." Indeed, Whedbee argues that "[i]n Grote's analysis, the rhetorical performances of demagogues like Cleon represented a kind of 'critical rationality' essential to achieving political liberty."³⁴ Moreover, Grote "maintained that political authority can be legitimate only when it is submitted to freely and deliberately. But free and deliberate assent means that dissent must always be kept open as a real option for individuals."³⁵ Such cues are important to our joint realization of an engaged political community.

Whether the reformulation occurs from a renewed look at the ancients, contemporary reinterpretations of rhetors that scholars and public alike once labeled demagogues, taking into account new cultural understandings, reinterpreting protest rhetoric, initiating new attempts to understand the vernacular, or attempting to calibrate how audiences interpret figurative language in everyday discourse, it seems clear that rhetorical scholars are mounting studies that are in fact engaged in the interrogation of our current rhetorical republic. Whether one prefers to investigate rhetorical democracy, democratic practices or products, or new democratic instantiations in the public sphere, or simply tries to append an alternative meaning and power to so-called "demagogic" discourse, there is unique purchase in mounting and sustaining reinterpretations of those rhetors who traditionally have been labeled demagogues. Rhetorical critics have been demonstrably unwilling to dismiss oppositional,

divisive, or strident discourse as part and parcel of these revisionist accounts. To my mind, this is a healthy development. Issues of democratic dissent are as crucial to our common destiny as issues of democratic assent. Continued study along these lines should enrich both theory and criticism while simultaneously bringing us new ways of seeing, interpreting, and enacting a vibrant and expanded realization of the polis.

NOTES

1. Patricia Roberts-Miller, "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8 (2005): 459–76; quotation, 474.
2. Roberts-Miller, "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric," 459.
3. Roberts-Miller, "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric," 462.
4. Steven R. Goldzwig, "A Social Movement Perspective on Demagoguery: Achieving Symbolic Realignment," *Communication Studies* 40 (1989): 202–28.
5. Roberts-Miller, "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric," 461.
6. Patricia A. Sullivan, "Signification and African-American Rhetoric: A Case Study of Jesse Jackson's 'Common Ground and Common Sense' Speech," *Communication Quarterly* 41 (1993): 1–15; quotation, 1.
7. Sullivan, "Signification and African-American Rhetoric," 4.
8. Sullivan, "Signification and African-American Rhetoric," 4.
9. Sullivan, "Signification and African-American Rhetoric," 6.
10. Sullivan, "Signification and African-American Rhetoric," 10.
11. Sullivan, "Signification and African-American Rhetoric," 11.
12. Sullivan, "Signification and African-American Rhetoric," 12.
13. Mark Lawrence McPhail, "Passionate Intensity: Louis Farrakhan and the Fallacies of Racial Reasoning," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 416–29.
14. Goldzwig, "A Social Movement Perspective on Demagoguery."
15. McPhail, "Passionate Intensity," 426, footnote 4.
16. McPhail, "Passionate Intensity," 417.
17. McPhail, "Passionate Intensity," 418.
18. McPhail, "Passionate Intensity," 421.
19. McPhail, "Passionate Intensity," 418.
20. John Arthos Jr., "The Shaman-Trickster's Art of Misdirection: The Rhetoric of Farrakhan and the Million Men," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87 (2001): 41–60.
21. Arthos Jr., "The Shaman-Trickster's Art of Misdirection," 56.
22. In addition to the discussion that follows, two excellent treatments of vernacular discourse can be found in Kent Ono and John A. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 19–46; and Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999). Moreover, reconsiderations of vernacular discourse and the public sphere are expanding our notions of the nature and function of democratic dissent. See, for example,

- Kendall R. Phillips, "The Spaces of Public Dissension: Reconsidering the Public Sphere," *Communication Monographs* 63 (1996): 231–48.
23. Samuel McCormick, "Earning One's Inheritance: Rhetorical Criticism, Everyday Talk, and the Analysis of Public Discourse," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 109–31; quotation, 109.
 24. McCormick, "Earning One's Inheritance," abstract, 109.
 25. Steven R. Goldzwig, "Multiculturalism, Rhetoric, and the Twenty-first Century," *Southern Communication Journal* 63 (1998): 273–91.
 26. Steven R. Goldzwig and Patricia A. Sullivan, "Narrative and Counternarrative in Print-Mediated Coverage of Milwaukee Alderman Michael McGee," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86 (2000): 215–31.
 27. J. Michael Hogan and Glen Williams, "The Rusticity and Religiosity of Huey P. Long," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7 (2004): 149–72; quotation, 151.
 28. Hogan and Williams, "The Rusticity and Religiosity of Huey P. Long," 166.
 29. James Darsey, "A Vision of the Apocalypse: Joe McCarthy's Rhetoric of the Fantastic," in *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 128–50; quotation, 129.
 30. James Darsey, "A Vision of the Apocalypse," 139.
 31. James Darsey, "A Vision of the Apocalypse," 135.
 32. Karen E. Whedbee, "Reclaiming Rhetorical Democracy: George Grote's Defense of Cleon and the Athenian Demagogues," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34 (2004): 71–95.
 33. Whedbee, "Reclaiming Rhetorical Democracy," 71–72.
 34. Whedbee, "Reclaiming Rhetorical Democracy," 72.
 35. Whedbee, "Reclaiming Rhetorical Democracy," 83.