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## Using Democracy Against Itself: Demagogic Rhetoric as an Attack on Democratic Institutions

Ryan Skinnell

[T]he aspirants to tyranny are either the principalmen of the state, who in democracies are demagogues and in oligarchies members of ruling houses, or those who hold great offices, and have a long tenure of them. ~ Aristotle, *The Politics*

Politicians who emerge from democratic practices can then work to undo democratic institutions.

This was true in the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as during the spread of communism in the 1940s, and indeed in the new wave of authoritarian regime changes of the 21st century. Indeed, absent a truly decisive revolution, which is a rare event, a regime change depends upon such people—regime changers—emerging in one system and transforming it into another. ~ Timothy Snyder, “Donald Trump and the New Dawn of Tyranny”

In Book IV of *The Politics*, Aristotle extends his philosophical treatise on the art of government to look specifically at various forms of constitutional government (democracy and oligarchy and their many variations). In describing these various forms, Aristotle assumes what we might recognize as a rhetorical orientation to governance, arguing that while there are “absolute best” forms of government in the abstract, what counts as “best” must be adapted to particular circumstances in practice. As such, he sets out to describe the varieties of oligarchy and democracy and “ascertain the modes of ruin and preservation both of constitutions generally and of each separately” (*Politics* IV, ii, 95). Among the varieties of democracy that interest him is what he describes as a fifth form, “in which, not the law, but the multitude, have the supreme power, and supersede the law by their decrees” (IV, iv, 100). Aristotle goes on to note that this state of affairs, which “is clearly not even a democracy in the true sense of the word,” is brought about by demagogues (IV, iv, 101).

There is much to argue over in Aristotle’s description of governance and its variations, including his famous—and famously imprecise—definition of demagoguery. The definition of demagoguery, starting with Aristotle, is an argumentative invitation I intend to take up in this essay. Demagoguery is a subject of much discussion around the world right now in light of international political affairs, but it is still somewhat murky as a concept, and it bears some conceptual elucidation if we are to explain demagoguery’s presence in politics and culture and address it.

As a number of scholars have noted, “Often, people use ‘demagogue’ to refer to a speaker they dislike who happens to use unethical arguments” (Stuedeman 7). The danger with attaching demagoguery to a demagogue in this way is that we become ignorant to the seeds of demagoguery that remain after one or another despot is removed from a position of power. In addition, given the tendency to use “demagogue” as a synonym for “someone I disagree with,” some rhetoricians, as well as other scholars, have dismissed its usefulness as a technical concept (e.g., Darsey 470; Goldzwig 475; Hogan and Tell 479-480). But the persistence of the term for more than 2000 years, plus its recent resurgence in popular discourse,<sup>1</sup> suggests that

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Chase; Garber; Kentish; Mercieca, “Rhetorical”; Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery*.

demagoguery is still important. And as political theorist James W. Ceasar argued a number of years ago, although technically vague, demagoguery “has at least a certain intuitive content” that makes it worthy of continued investigation (319).

Given demagoguery’s inextricable association with speech, political deliberation, and democracy, I accept Patricia Roberts-Miller’s claim from more than a decade ago that demagoguery is fundamentally (though not exclusively) a rhetorical issue (“Democracy”).<sup>2</sup> In her newest book, *Rhetoric and Demagoguery*, she defines demagoguery as

a polarizing discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric through framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and means by which (not whether) the out-group should be punished/scapegoated for the current problems of the in-group. (16)

Roberts-Miller’s definition informs my central argument in this essay, which is that demagogic rhetoric necessarily incorporates arguments, topoi, and evidence that attack and attempt to undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions. But since demagoguery remains a contested term, the definition invites continued rhetorical deliberation as we grapple with its usefulness, persistence, and presence in world affairs, and consider what, if anything, we will do about it.

This essay proceeds in three parts. First, I begin by unpacking Aristotle’s definition of demagoguery because, although it is imprecise, it also has much to commend it. In fact it is possible, and even likely, that the imprecision of his definition opens space for rhetoricians to continue to (re)discover some of demagoguery’s important rhetorical dimensions. Moreover, it remains a touchstone in scholarship about demagoguery across disciplines. Revisiting Aristotle’s imprecise definition can help us hone in on a better definition for our own needs. Specifically, I contend that Aristotle’s definition illuminates an important characteristic of demagogic rhetoric, which is that demagoguery fundamentally seeks to undermine the institutions of democratic governance.

Next, I turn to what Aristotle’s definition of demagoguery can tell us about a prototypical demagogue—in this case, Hitler. At a glance, rereading Hitler may seem to be “stacking the deck”—that is choosing an obvious demagogue to make arguments about cultures of demagoguery—but I contend that this particular example actually focuses rhetoricians’ attention on demagogic rhetoric that is not reducible to a demagogic archetype, nor to “an emotional argument that I disagree with.” Many scholars have attempted to distinguish demagoguery by reference to the rhetoric demagogues use—its populist nature, its passionate (and unethical) emotional appeals, its negative consequences, or the deplorable moral character of the rhetor.<sup>3</sup> Any or all of these may be present in demagoguery, but they may also be absent; and they may also be present in discourse that no one would characterize as demagogic. In other words, these characterizations do not appear to be useful for distinguishing demagogues from non-demagogues. In looking to Hitler’s example here, I intend to show the culture of demagoguery in operation at the time.

Ultimately, I argue that one consistent—perhaps defining—characteristic of demagoguery is that it relies on appeals to a form of radical democracy in order to attack the

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<sup>2</sup> Given the rise of authoritarian leaders around the world who have employed demonization and scapegoating to come to power, rhetorical scholarship on demagoguery has been making a comeback after years of relatively little discussion. See, e.g., Gunn; Johnson; Mader; Mercieca, *Demagogue*; Roberts-Miller, *Rhetoric*; Steudeman.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Gustainis; cf. Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery* 21-31

legitimacy of democratic institutions. In particular, I contend that demagoguery hyperextends or supercharges direct democracy by amplifying “the will of the people” to undermine the constraining functions of democratic institutions. Following efforts by rhetorical theorists like Roberts-Miller to define demagoguery not as what demagogues do (with the emphasis on the demagogue) but as how a culture engages in public discourse and decision-making (*Rhetoric*), I argue that anti-institutional appeals can become a commonplace way of arguing about public policy and are crucial for fostering a culture of demagoguery.

### Aristotle’s Demagogue

In Aristotle’s taxonomy of governing systems, democracies are the best possible version of constitutional governments because they are “safer and more permanent,” (IV, xi, 110) as well as “more relaxed and gentler” (IV, iii, 96) than oligarchies (which are still vastly superior to tyrannies). Nevertheless, democracies—and democracies alone—are susceptible to demagogues. Given his reputation among rhetoricians as “the clarifier, the taxonomizer, the organizer, the details man” (Neel 76), Aristotle might be expected to provide an explicit definition of “demagogue” in *The Politics*, but none is offered. He does helpfully note in Book V that demagogues “of old” had commonly been military generals, “[w]hereas in our day, when the art of rhetoric has made such progress, the orators lead the people” (V, v, 132). In so doing, he seems to clearly locate demagoguery in the realm of rhetoric but nonetheless eschews an explicit definition of the term.

The closest Aristotle comes to furnishing a definition of demagogue/ry is in an analogy worth quoting in its entirety:

[I]n democracies which are subject to the law the best citizens hold the first place, and there are no demagogues; but where the laws are not supreme, there demagogues spring up. For the people becomes a monarch, and is many in one; and the many have the power in their hands, not as individuals, but collectively. Homer says that “it is not good to have a rule of many,” but whether he means this corporate rule, or the rule of many individuals, is uncertain. At all events this sort of democracy, which is now a monarch, and no longer under the control of law, seeks to exercise monarchical sway, and grows into a despot; the flatterer is held in honour [sic]; this sort of democracy being relatively to other democracies what tyranny is to other forms of monarchy. The spirit of both is the same, and they alike exercise a despotic rule over the better citizens. The decrees of the demos correspond to the edicts of the tyrant; and the demagogue is to the one what the flatterer is to the other. (IV, iv, 100)

It is important to note Aristotle’s sense of what makes a “better citizen,” which is for him a relative term. In light of his earlier distinction between “absolute best government” in the abstract and “best government” in practice, Aristotle does not assert that better citizens are necessarily elites. Which is to say, in a best-government-in-practice any citizen may conceivably be among the best, irrespective of wealth, pedigree, or talent if s/he advances and protects the central objectives of constitutional government. The requisite corollary is that demagogues are not necessarily members of the lower classes. In fact many, if not most ancient demagogues, including prototypical “bad guy” demagogue, Cleon (Whedbee 71) were wealthy, privileged, and/or aristocratic. In short, we cannot assume demagogues necessarily come from or represent a particular class of people, nor can we assume elites are a natural bulwark against demagoguery (see also, Roberts-Miller, *Rhetoric* 75-76).

For another, although he later raises the question of whether or not it is legitimately democratic, Aristotle maintains that this form of governance is a democracy, inasmuch as *the people* have the power in their hands. Much to Aristotle's chagrin, the people collectively act as a monarch, but they are nevertheless participating in democratic rule by the free majority.

Third, it is noteworthy that Aristotle does not equate "demagogue" with "tyrant," which is the more common way of talking about demagogues. Toward the end of the passage I cited above, Aristotle offers the following analogical equation:

**decrees of the demos : edicts of the tyrant :: demagogue : flatterer**

In this logical chain, Aristotle equates the demagogue to the flatterer—that is, one who panders to the tyrannical leader. Note that the flatterer is, by implication, a subordinate of the tyrant—subject to, but a champion of, the tyrant's edicts.<sup>4</sup> And like the flatterer, Aristotle's demagogue does not necessarily supplant the leader (though that is a potential outcome). Rather, as long as the demagogue is a demagogue (as opposed to a tyrant), s/he remains subordinated to and in service of the demos. This is true even if s/he has some control over how the demos' will gets focused, enacted, and/or expressed.

Aristotle's demagogue/tyrant distinction also bears an interesting, if tacit, notion of sequential order. Typically a tyrant attracts flatterers, which implies that the tyrant exists prior to the flatterer. Likewise, the demos brings the demagogue into being. That is, rather than merely being an unethical "politician skilled in oratory, flattery, and invective" (Luthin 3) or a "skillful" speaker or writer who seeks to "influence public opinion by employing the traditional tools of rhetoric with complete indifference to the truth" to his or her own selfish ends (Lomas 165), Aristotle's demagogue steps into a kairotic moment rather than bringing it about. In other words, if demagoguery is the way a culture argues, then people arguing in that culture will use demagoguery, and some of them will be successful. As I discuss below, this view is in keeping with emerging theories of demagoguery.

Crucially for Aristotle, the fundamental perversion of this form of democracy is not simply that the people rule as one, but that this form of rule relies on an inversion of the popular will and the supremacy of the laws. In comparing this fifth form of democracy to the other four forms, he notes that it is in all respects the same, save one. In the fifth form—the one that is "brought about by demagogues"—"not the law, but the multitude, have the supreme power, and supersede the law by their decrees" (IV, v, 100). One way to read this line is that demagogues usurp the state's power. Another way to read it, however, is that demagogues do not thwart democracy so much as they supercharge it. Aristotle writes:

The demagogues make the decrees of the people override the laws, and refer all things to the popular assembly. And therefore [demagogues] grow great, because the people have all things in their hands, and they [demagogues] hold in their hands the votes of the people, who are too ready to listen to them. Further, those who have any complaint to bring against the magistrates say, "let the people be judges;" the people are too happy to accept the invitation; and *so the authority of every office is undermined*. (IV, iv, 100-101, emphasis added)

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<sup>4</sup> See Wohl for an extended and provocative discussion of the distinctions between "demagogue" and "tyrant."

Elsewhere Aristotle refers to the threat of “extreme democracy” or “rampant democracy,” (IV, xi, 110) and either term seems appropriate to what he is describing here. Demagogues, in this reading, do not oppose democracy candidly, but rather lead rhetorical attacks against democratic institutions’ legitimacy by amplifying and channeling the will of the people, even in circumstances that are under the direct purview of democratic institutions.<sup>5</sup>

There are undoubtedly other ways to read Aristotle’s ruminations on demagoguery, but that’s really my point. His imprecision is an invitation to invent in the available definitional means. As I discuss below, democratic institutions are designed to limit, regulate, or mediate groups’ and individuals’ will. And as Aristotle points out, the effect of demagoguery is that “the authority of every office [in a democracy] is undermined.” Taken together, I contend that a possible—and rhetorically advantageous—reading of Aristotle is that demagogues hyperextend the principle of direct democracy to attack the institutions designed to regulate democracy.

### **Instituting Democracy**

In enumerating the different possible kinds of constitutional governments, Aristotle asserts that “a constitution is an organization of offices which all the citizens distribute among themselves” (IV, iii, 95). I adopt the term “institutions”<sup>6</sup> in place of Aristotle’s “organization of offices,” but the basic insight remains. Democracy as a political system is based on the establishment of relatively stable institutions. Democratic institutions have taken different forms in different historical contexts, but in general, they including various administrative, judicial, legislative, and executive bodies that facilitate the basic functions of governance (V, xiv, 114; see also Signer 33). At their best, democratic institutions—which may include everything from political parties to labor unions to the press, in addition to government offices and agencies—are intended to distribute governmental responsibilities among citizens, regulate popular *and* aristocratic passions, stabilize governing processes and procedures over time, formalize systems for mediating difference and dissent, and thereby serve the common good. Often the functions organized by democratic institutions get collectively referred to as “the rule of law,” which is in contradistinction to the undemocratic “rule of man” (that is, rule by powerful individuals).

In addition to facilitating good governance, however, democratic institutions also limit democracy, and in fact, they have to. By design, democratic institutions standardize political

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<sup>5</sup> Take, for example, the United States Senate’s refusal in March 2016 to consider Merrick Garland’s nomination to the Supreme Court. Despite the Senate’s responsibility for conducting the confirmation process, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell demurred, saying “The American people are perfectly capable of having their say on this issue, so let’s give them a voice. Let’s let the American people decide” (Kelly). Chair of the Senate Judiciary, Chuck Grassley, agreed. “The American people shouldn’t be denied a voice,” he said. “Do we want a court that interprets the law, or do we want a court that acts as an unelected super legislature?”

<sup>6</sup> As I argue elsewhere, rhetoricians do not have a precise definition of “institution,” using it to mean anything from “any man-made [sic] civilizing collective, including laws, cities, and the arts” to “political communities, markets, and money” to “the systematic collection of specialized professional knowledge” and more (Skinnell, “Toward”). In this essay, following G. Thomas Goodnight, I use it to mean formal structures that “regulate [democratic] behavior through providing norms that reward ‘acceptable’ conduct, sanction the ‘inappropriate,’ and order expectations of exchange” (360).

activity because the actual practice of democracy is never wholly in line with any one view of political principles. In other words, democratic institutions formalize difference and dissent, even as they stabilize and regularize governance (see March and Olsen; Schmidt). No one gets everything they want. By necessity, democratic institutions have to exceed any specific group's or individual's desires or advantages because institutions are fundamentally concerned with the general welfare of the state and its stakeholders.

Democracy's regulative function, in particular, is demagoguery's primary target, and for obvious reasons. Democratic institutions are supposed to staunch opportunities for ruthless, corrupt, or unethical individuals from taking control—to protect the rule of law and guard against the rule of man. Political scientist Jeffrey K. Tulis argues that America's Founders, for instance, put democratic institutions into place that would specifically mitigate against demagoguery: "They attempted both to narrow the range of acceptable demagogic appeals through the architectonic act of founding itself and to mitigate the effects of such appeals in the day to day conduct of governance through the particular institutions they created" (97). According to Tulis, the Founders accepted the continued presence of demagogic appeals, but they hoped to build institutions that would blunt demagoguery's edge.

To be effective, then, demagogues (or, as Aristotle evocatively calls them, "aspirants to tyranny" [V, viii, 139]) must undermine democratic institutions' ability to protect the rule of law. And notwithstanding the careful development of anti-demagogic institutions, the people's right to vote means democracy is always susceptible to demagoguery. As such, I contend that demagogic rhetoric encompasses, and even prioritizes, arguments that attack the legitimacy of democratic institutions to regulate "the will of the people" (usually very loosely defined). That is, a primary characteristic of demagogic rhetoric is that its practitioners attempt to turn democracy against itself, and they do so by advocating for supercharging the will of the demos to attack the limits of democratic institutions.

### **Hitler's Demagogic Rhetoric**

We can get a preliminary sense of demagogic rhetoric's anti-institutional tendencies by looking briefly at an example: Adolf Hitler's 1933 "Policy Statement on the Enabling Act to the Reichstag." I realize the choice of Hitler will strike some readers as begging the demagogic question, but in fact his "Policy Statement" is demagogic in ways we might not expect, which is what makes it such a useful example. In particular, although it is a monumental and catastrophically effective speech that marks the boundary between Hitler-as-aspirant-to-tyranny and Hitler-as-tyrant, the anti-institutional arguments in Hitler's "Policy Statement" speech were rather commonplace in Germany at the time. As such, we can catch a glimpse of Germany's culture of demagoguery by looking at the anti-institutional rhetoric in an aspirational tyrant's speech.

The Enabling Act was a legislative measure passed in the German parliament, the Reichstag, less than a month after a fire was started by a protestor at the Reichstag building (see Kershaw 456-459; Ullrich 421-429). The Enabling Act effectively gave Hitler dictatorial powers by granting the Chancellor<sup>7</sup> the right to pass legislation without needing ratification from Parliament. His "Policy Statement" in support of the Enabling Act was delivered on March 23,

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<sup>7</sup> German President Paul von Hindenburg named Hitler as the Chancellor in January of 1933, just two months before the Reichstag fire. See Kershaw and Ullrich for excellent histories of Hitler's rise to power.

1933, just hours before the decisive vote was taken. Hitler scholars have detailed at length the fraudulent and coercive circumstances in which the Enabling Act vote was carried out, but the speech is nevertheless noteworthy because Hitler still needed to convince members of the Reichstag to vote in his favor. In other words, it was intended to persuade a (presumably) undecided audience.

In the speech, Hitler proposes a “Law for Removing the Distress of Volk [the people] and Reich,” which he contends would allow his government to stabilize the economy, to effect the “national and moral regeneration” (279) of the German people, and to restore Germany’s national sovereignty. He allows that his solution—essentially, establishing a dictatorship—is an “extraordinary measure,” but it is nevertheless warranted under the circumstances.

Hitler’s “Policy Statement” illustrates two key issues for understanding how anti-institutional demagogic rhetoric functions.<sup>8</sup> First, the “Policy Statement” is not what we might expect from one of the most consequential speeches by the most notorious demagogue of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are certainly racist dog whistles throughout the speech, but as Roberts-Miller points out, “Hitler did sound more reasonable than he had in his beerhall speeches. He never said the word ‘Jew,’ and only mentioned race twice. He didn’t say anything about Aryans, and talked a lot about the ‘volk’” (“Hitler’s March”). Nevertheless, the “Policy Statement” is demagogic if we adopt Roberts-Miller’s definition of demagoguery as “a polarizing discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric through framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and means by which (not whether) the out-group should be punished/scapegoated for the current problems of the in-group” (*Rhetoric* 16).

The “Policy Statement” is, in fact, a textbook example of demagoguery under this definition. Hitler demonizes Marxists (which is basically anyone who opposes him); promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric if he’s given dictatorial powers; and pledges everything from “moral purging” to the ruthless eradication of “high treason and betrayal of the Volk” (280). Although it is a demagogic speech, however, it is important to note how *not* demagogic it might seem to a reasonable listener or reader, especially for an audience without the benefit of hindsight to compare the speech against Hitler’s subsequent actions. Hitler managed to restrain his virulent antisemitism, or at least constrain it to plausibly deniable insinuations.

But second, and more importantly, a consistent theme of Hitler’s Reichstag speech is that democratic institutions needed to be suspended and/or destroyed to save Germany.<sup>9</sup> Given what we might expect from an avowed anti-Semite, his anti-institutional rhetoric is almost subtle enough to be ignored, but it really is the primary appeal of the speech. The central function of the Enabling Act was to suspend the constitution, so that’s immediately apparent, but Hitler also openly belittles democratic deliberation (“The completely opposite approaches of the individuals to the concepts of state...will lead to a war of all against all” [276]); he condemns voting practices (“It...results in a complete invalidation of the legislative bodies in the eyes of the Volk when, even assuming normal times, the Volk is driven to the polls...almost twenty times in the course of four years” [278]); and he attacks the rule of law (“The theoretical concept of equality

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<sup>8</sup> Rhetoricians would do well to spend some time with this speech, especially given its import in world history. See Roberts-Miller, “Hitler’s March 1933 Speech to the Reichstag” for a good example.

<sup>9</sup> See Agamben for a discussion of the Third Reich as “a state of exception that lasted twelve years” (9).



before the law shall not be used, under the guise of equality, to tolerate those who despise the laws as a matter of principle or, moreover, to surrender the freedom of the nation to them on the basis of democratic doctrines” [278]). Hitler simultaneously lauds the importance of the constitution, the judiciary, and legislative bodies (including the Reichstag), even as he asserts democracy’s failure in Germany since the end of World War I.

In effect, Hitler lays out an extended—albeit somewhat oblique—argument that Germany’s state of crisis was a direct result of the fact that democratic institutions failed. In surveying the fourteen-year existence of the Weimar government, he claims that the steady decline of Germany under parliamentary rule “served to promote the insight into the necessity of thoroughly rejecting the ideas, organizations, and men in which one gradually and rightly began to recognize the underlying causes of our decay” (276). In retrospect, we might understand this statement as a claim for rejecting corrupt ideas (liberalism and Bolshevism), as well as corrupt people (Jews, Romas, and Sintis, among others). But in the context of the speech, it could just as easily have been understood as a rebuke of democracy, democratic institutions, and democratic representatives.

Hitler’s initial solution—less obliquely—is to suspend democratic institutions in order to restore the government and the nation to its rightful place as a servant of the people (“the Volk”). Suspend the constitution, purge the judiciary, and subvert the legislature. Ultimately, according to Hitler, the suspension of the Weimar constitution would result in further reforms of the Reich government, which would then result in “a constitution which ties the will of the Volk to the authority of a genuine leadership” (278). And he implies that if this temporary action is taken, things will eventually return to normal.

In Aristotelian terms, this central element of Hitler’s speech—his central policy proposal, in fact—might reasonably be described as “the demagogue mak[ing] the decrees of the people override the laws...so the authority of every office is undermined.” Throughout the speech Hitler asserts that the Enabling Act must be passed in the support of the people, and he even notes that in voting the National Socialists into power, the German people gave their approval for the bill that was designed to cripple the institutions that limited the will of the people (276). The effect, of course, is that Hitler was granted dictatorial powers.

By my accounting, Hitler’s “Policy Statement” is an excellent example of the anti-institutional quality of demagogic rhetoric. But it is important to note that Hitler’s “Policy Statement” was also perfectly in keeping with more than a decade’s worth of speeches, statements, policy proposals, and political campaigns by a number of Germany’s far-right nationalist groups, including by definitely not limited to the National Socialists. Likewise, it was consonant with speeches, statements, policy proposals, and political campaigns by Germany’s business-friendly conservatives, a political faction that differed in significant ways from the far-right nationalists. Conservatives were often concerned by Hitler’s rabble rousing, race baiting, and advocacy of violence, but they were also often very comfortable with his anti-democratic message.

In other words, as Hitler scholars have pointed out, much of what Hitler was arguing throughout the 1920s and early 30s, up to and including the “Policy Statement,” was quotidian. Hitler’s “Policy Statement” was successful in large part because Germany in the 1920s and 1930s was a culture of demagoguery. The argument that democratic institutions were failing and needed to be scrapped was a relatively common one at the time, particularly among political elites (Kershaw 424-425). For example, Hitler biographer Volker Ullrich cites German President Hindenburg (a conservative) as being “quite pleased” with the March 1933 election that put the

National Socialists in the majority because they could stop holding regular elections for a while. “The ‘parliamentary hullabaloo,’ the president said, had always been ‘deeply alien and unsavoury’ to him” (436). Democracy in general was distasteful to many Germans, especially those that identified with the country’s right-leaning parties, because democracy supposedly restricted the will of the people. Hitler came to power, obviously, but he was one demagogue among many who might have risen to power in Germany’s potent culture of demagoguery.

### A Culture of Demagoguery

Cultures of demagoguery flourish whenever the regulatory function of democracy is weakened. Hitler’s “Policy Statement on the Enabling Act to the Reichstag” openly, and unabashedly, championed Germans’ personal freedoms by attacking the limiting conditions of democracy as corrupt, paralyzed, and overly constraining. He advocates weakening or discarding democratic institutions in order to restore power to the people, but in so doing, he was repeating and activating commonplaces—not inventing a new, demagogic reality on his own. The same is true in a number of stereotypically demagogic speeches.

In Cleon’s legendarily demagogic speech in the Mytilenean debate, for instance, he begins by proclaiming his conviction that “democracy is incapable of ruling others” (Thucydides 146). Cleon goes on to question at length the central value of democratic deliberation in the Athenian Assembly, and although he champions the laws over “cleverness or contests in intelligence,” his basic argument is for bypassing the democratic procedures established for deliberative decision-making.<sup>10</sup> Cleon was wildly successful, but he was not a lone demagogue in an otherwise healthy democracy. He stepped into the role of spokesman for a widely circulating series of beliefs, especially among military leaders. Likewise, in Huey Long’s notorious “Every Man a King” speech, he explicitly attacks the New Deal programs and the executive branch’s ability to serve the people (Long). The remedy he proposes is for his listeners to join a “Share Our Wealth Society” to ensure the redistribution of wealth. That is, by implication at least, he suggests “the people” need to throw off the constraints of the Federal government and reclaim their own power. But again, Long adopted and adapted demagogic rhetoric that had been in circulation in America well before he gave his famous speech in 1934.

I could go on analyzing traditionally demagogic speeches or figures to note their anti-democratic rhetoric, but there are likely to be diminishing returns. In fact, as James Darsey argues, there may not be much value at all in proving that conventional demagogues are conventional demagogues. In his critique of Roberts-Miller’s proposal for more and better demagoguery scholarship in rhetoric, Darsey contends that referring to “the traditional roster of demagogic figures”—including Adolf Hitler, Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Joe McCarthy—amounts to little more than stacking the deck (464).

Darsey’s criticism is fair if the central goal of demagogic rhetoric scholarship is to locate individual demagogues who have led democracies astray. But as Roberts-Miller argues in *Demagoguery and Democracy*, “We don’t have demagoguery in our culture because a demagogue came to power; when demagoguery becomes the normal way of participating in

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<sup>10</sup> Whedbee notes, “Historical records provide no indication that Cleon ever engaged in any action that would have violated the requirements of the democratic constitution” (79). By contrast, Arlene Saxonhouse argues, “Cleon threatens democracy...by a professed reverence for the past as a restraint. Decisions that were made in the past (even if it was only yesterday) must hold, he claims” (154).

public discourse, then it's just a question of time until a demagogue arises" (2; see also *Rhetoric and Demagoguery* 1-2). For Roberts-Miller, a culture of demagoguery replaces the hard work of democratic deliberation with a simplified, identity-based form of decision-making.

Consequently, public policy decisions are made on the basis of in-group and out-group identity instead of democratic deliberation. But identifying and recognizing demagogues that have come to power can help us recognize when and where cultures of demagoguery are operating.

Roberts-Miller's theory of "a culture of demagoguery" invites rhetoric scholars to back away from some of the more troubling limitations of traditional demagoguery scholarship. For instance, it urges us to back away from the easy equation of demagoguery with "arguments I don't like" or the assumption that all divisive rhetoric is equally harmful.<sup>11</sup> If demagoguery is a way of participating in public discourse and decision-making, rhetorical scholars can observe that demagogic rhetoric may be widespread, non-partisan, ecumenical, and even relatively harmless. In Roberts-Miller's definition of demagoguery as "polarizing discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric," demagoguery is not a single incident, such as a divisive speech or even a divisive figure, though those may give us important clues. Nevertheless, demagoguery is a cultural campaign. And there can be multiple demagogues at any given time, arguing for many different things, some righteous, some not, some public-minded, some selfish.

This cultural definitional of demagoguery also encourages us to back away from the implication that success is a precondition of demagoguery. Hitler, for example, is the quintessential demagogue at least in part because he was so successful as a politician and totalitarian murderer. In other words, Hitler was successful, but there is every reason to believe that if he hadn't been, another demagogue would have arisen because the culture of demagoguery was so strong and demagogic arguments were commonplace. We need not accept that another demagogue would have enacted the Final Solution to believe that another orator/politician/demagogue could have put the prevailing forms of public discourse and decision-making to use in ways that profoundly shaped (or reshaped) Germany.

All this to say, that while divisive speeches or divisive figures who are successful may give us useful clues to notice a culture of demagoguery, demagogic rhetoric can be identified without the precondition that it has worked. Cultures of demagoguery operate even when they haven't resulted in tyranny. If we attend carefully to the anti-institutional appeals that I argue characterize demagoguery, we can identify cultures where public discourse and decision-making are predominantly demagogic before they become tyrannical.

### **What We Will Do About It**

Cultures of demagoguery incorporate anti-institutional rhetoric as a necessary—and significant—element. The attack on democratic institutions may be low-level (chats around the dinner table or speeches in beer halls), it may be mid-level (in popular culture, journalism, or voluntary associations [see Vitolo-Haddad in this issue]), or it may be high-level (official party platforms or prominent political campaigns). It may even be the case that anti-institutional

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<sup>11</sup> Signer observes a "paradox" of demagoguery, which is that "demagogues occasionally have a positive, progressive effect" (36). Nevertheless, even "beneficial demagogues" subvert the system of law—it just so happens that in some cases, the law is corrupt.

rhetoric is always present in a democracy because dissent is an important characteristic of democracy.

But the key difference between dissent—which is formally institutionalized in democratic institutions<sup>12</sup>—and demagoguery is that the former exists to make best-government-in-practice more fair and responsive to “the common good.” Dissent, of course, may be uncomfortable, painful, and even violent at times, but it fundamentally accepts the importance of democratic institutions. Dissent is enshrined, for example, in judicial review, freedoms of speech and the press, and freedoms to petition governments for redress, among others. Dissenting speech defends the importance of democratic institutions even as it seeks to change them to better support “the common good.” By contrast, demagoguery attacks democratic institutions’ legitimacy and seeks to end them, or at the very least, neutralize them.

Rhetorical attacks on democratic institutions may ultimately be good or bad, effective or ineffective, ethical or unethical, but over time they can have the effect of destabilizing people’s faith in the institutions that are meant to mediate democratic societies. Moreover, the use of and eventual reliance on anti-institutional rhetoric—irrespective of the desirability of the outcome—nurtures demagogic culture, which subsequently reinforces the rhetorical benefits of attacking institutions. It is a mutually reinforcing cycle. This is why demagoguery—irrespective of ultimate motives, good intentions, and so on—is so dangerous to a democracy: because it weakens the regulative institutions that make diversity, difference, and meaningful reform possible. In other words, demagogic rhetoric is always aimed at reshaping—if not undermining entirely—democratic institutions.

As Roberts-Miller points out, “How we define demagoguery implies what we will do about it” (*Rhetoric* 190). By defining demagoguery in this way, rhetoricians can begin to focus less on the intent of demagogues or the ultimate outcomes of demagoguery, which are notoriously hard to classify, and focus more on the rhetorical functions of demagogic appeals against democratic institutions. We can see them in rhetorical attacks, for example, on free and fair elections, due process, an independent press, and even the advisability of compromise in legislatures. We can see demagoguery in our own circumstances and others, and perhaps most importantly, with practice, we can begin to identify demagoguery in our own in-groups. Which is to say, in a culture of demagoguery, demagogues are as likely as not to be people we agree with—and they may even be us.

The value of such analysis, ultimately, is to recover demagoguery as a technical term that has explanatory value *before* there is a demagogue of tyrannical intent, when we can still act and bring attention to the culture of demagoguery. In so doing, we can begin to invent, and just as importantly, practice arguments that take up the mantle of dissent—arguments that defend democratic institutions as valuable even as we seek to reorient institutions to better serve the common good.

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<sup>12</sup> I am well aware that formal institutionalization is not the same as practical actuality. Nevertheless, dissent is explicitly formalized in democratic institutions, which means, at least the mechanisms for change exist in a functioning democratic society.

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