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6-11-2019

## Rhetoric's Demagogue | Demagoguery's Rhetoric: An Introduction

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### Recommended Citation

Ryan Skinnell. "Rhetoric's Demagogue | Demagoguery's Rhetoric: An Introduction" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (2019): 225-232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2019.1610636>

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## Introduction to “Rhetoric’s Demagogue | Demagoguery’s Rhetoric”

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A demagogue can only succeed in an atmosphere of free speech and free expression, since...demagoguery is intimately bound up with rhetoric. ~ J. Justin Gustainis, “Demagoguery and Political Rhetoric: A Review of the Literature”

For both academics and the greater community the importance of understanding demagogic devices lies as much in the future as in the past. Only by seeing these devices for what they are can the body politic fairly appraise political leaders’ worthiness and, it is to be hoped, hold them accountable. ~ P.M. Carpenter, “What Qualifies as Demagoguery?”

The essays in this special issue are about rhetoric’s relationship to demagoguery. This is a very old relationship, of course, but everything old is new again.

We would like to start briefly with the old, then, before we turn to what is new. As the story goes, around 430BCE, Athenian general and politician Cleon rose to power following Pericles’s death. Although a member of the Athens elite himself, Cleon (in)famously pioneered the use of populist, demagogic rhetoric to manipulate Greece’s ignorant masses and sway the mob to his unethical ways of believing and acting. According to his critics (in particular, Thucydides and Aristophanes), Cleon was a deeply unscrupulous rhetor, eschewing truth, making impossible promises, and using emotionally charged arguments to win allegiance to his views and win power for himself. In short, Cleon pandered to Athenians’ basest prejudices and desires in order to advance his own ambitions. And although many subsequent rhetors have competed vigorously for the title, Cleon remains the “prototypical ‘bad guy’ demagogue” (Whedbee 71).

As Cleon’s example demonstrates, rhetoricians have long had a keen interest in demagogues and demagoguery. Cicero had Publius Clodius, John Quincy Adams had Andrew Jackson, and Kenneth Burke had Adolf Hitler. Despite varying understandings of who or what a demagogue is or what a demagogue does, it is little surprise that demagoguery has long occupied rhetoricians, who are of course also interested in persuasion, argument, politics, public speech, affect, emotion, ethics, deliberative discourse, and essentially all the other realms of rhetorical action touched by the demagogue.

But all of this is old. And given that this special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* is intended to help “set the intellectual agenda in rhetorical studies,” the obvious question is, “What is new?”

For one, more than two and a half millennia after Cleon’s ignominious rise and fall, rhetoricians are still grappling with demagoguery—how to define it, how to identify who engages in it, how to explain its rhetorical character and effects, how to resist it, and how to reverse it (or if it’s even possible to do so). Historian P.M. Carpenter wrote in 2004, “Surprisingly few attempts have been made at defining the term ‘demagoguery’ with much precision, despite its frequent use as a negative epithet by politicians, their critics, historians, political sociologists and the like.” Circumstances have changed somewhat since Carpenter’s essay was published, but not radically. And rhetoricians, in particular, still have much work to do because their grappling with the terms demagogue and demagoguery has not been a progressive,

cumulative project, nor even a consistent one. As Patricia Roberts-Miller documented in her 2005 article, “Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric,” following significant rhetorical interest in the wake of Hitler’s and McCarthy’s rise and fall, rhetorical theorists largely moved away from studying demagogues and demagoguery in the late-20th century. Her article gave a review of recent literature on demagoguery, noted the decline (and eventual absence) of demagoguery research in rhetorical studies, and attempted to induce a revived interest in demagoguery scholarship among rhetoricians.

The subsequent issue of *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* (where Roberts-Miller’s essay was initially published) included a forum in which several rhetoricians took up her inducement, at least briefly. All the respondents concluded in one way or another, however, that a renewed interest in demagoguery was not necessary in rhetorical studies because other concepts or areas of focus already examined the technical issues involved, but without the loaded terminology (see, e.g., Darsey; Goldzwig). As Michael Hogan and Dave Tell put it, “interest in ‘demagoguery’ has never ‘lapsed’ in rhetorical studies, although the term—for good reason—has fallen into disfavor” (479-480). With a few exceptions (e.g., Gehrke; Gunn; Roberts-Miller, “Dissent”), demagoguery remained out of favor in rhetorical studies in the decade following Roberts-Miller’s essay. As recently as 2016, Paul Elliott Johnson noted that “rhetoricians [still] infrequently invoke demagoguery” (230).

And yet, given the realities of national and international politics, demagoguery is back in the forefront of the world’s political consciousness. Political leaders in such far-flung countries as France (Marine Le Pen), Turkey (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan), Hungary (Viktor Orbán), Russia (Vladimir Putin), the Philippines (Rodrigo Duterte), and Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), among others, have been credibly accused of employing demagogic rhetoric in their aspirations to, or maintenance of, political power.

It should come as little surprise, then, that rhetorical scholarship on demagoguery is also coming back into favor, including in the important scholarship produced by several contributors to this issue (i.e., Mercieca, Steudeman, and Roberts-Miller). The main catalyst for American rhetoricians’ interest in demagoguery has been Donald J. Trump, whose presidential campaign, election, and subsequent administration have been described by countless commentators as demagogic. But as the essays here make clear, demagoguery in the contemporary moment is not exclusive to Trump-the-rhetor, nor even to the list of demagogues above. In fact, the focus on individual demagogues is largely misguided. Because although rhetorical scholarship on demagoguery often seems to follow the demagogue (that is, discussions about demagoguery are generally reactions to a demagogue when we’re looking for a “fix”), Roberts-Miller advances the idea, and our work here extends it, that we have to be *actively* working against demagoguery even/especially when there is no one in sight we’d associate with the term.

In fact, what is most new about rhetoric’s recent engagements with demagoguery is the effort to rethink what rhetorical scholarship actually teaches us about it. In that effort, Roberts-Miller has been on the leading edge. Whereas most—and in fact, almost all—rhetorical scholarship since Cleon has focused on the demagogue-as-speaker, Roberts-Miller argues for redirecting our attention from the figure (the demagogue) to the discourse (demagoguery). In her 2017 popular press book, *Demagoguery and Democracy*, she defines demagoguery as “discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric by framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and the means by which (not whether) the out-group should be scapegoated for the current problems of the in-group” (33). It is worth noting explicitly that this definition describes demagogic rhetoric that *anyone* can use, not just so-called

“demagogues.” The essays in this issue largely follow Roberts-Miller’s reconception of demagoguery, noting how particular speakers and/or groups participate in larger demagogic cultural discourses at work in the world.

For Roberts-Miller, demagogic rhetoric is endemic to particular rhetorical environments. Rhetors of all stripes engage in demagoguery when it is the primary (or least a prominent and acceptable) mode of public discourse. When rhetors are more effective making arguments about identity than they are making deliberative arguments about policy, it is only a matter of time before someone who uses demagogic rhetoric rises to power. Which is to say, for example, that Donald Trump may be engaged in demagoguery (by our accounting, he is), but he is not alone, either in America or in the world. His voice is amplified by his position and is therefore more dangerous than other people’s because of its potential rhetorical effects. But his use of demagogic rhetoric is in many ways very similar to other people’s at this historical moment, including by people who do not share his politics. In other words, one reason there are so many identifiable demagogues in positions of power right now is because demagogic rhetoric is ubiquitous in public deliberation, irrespective of rhetors’ political allegiance.

To put it more bluntly still, we are all nascent demagogues. When a culture of demagoguery is ascendant, *any* person engaged in any way with political discourse and public policy arguments can—and often will—use demagogic rhetoric. After all, we know that neither far-right, far-left, nor radical center have solitary claim to demagoguery. Likewise, demagoguery is not reserved only for rich or for poor, elite or *hoi polloi*. Under the right conditions we all choose to step into the role of demagogue, willingly, happily—and without even needing to be convinced. As Burke notes in “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” “The yearning for unity is so great that people are always willing to meet you halfway if you will give it to them by fiat, by flat statement, regardless of the facts” (205-206).

By our accounting, demagoguery does not require a person to be in power or even to be actively seeking power. It requires certain rhetorical conditions that make it argumentatively effective. When those conditions exist, people engage in demagoguery. When those conditions exist, everyone engages in demagoguery.

Ultimately some demagogic ideas may become more ascendant than others, and some demagogues may achieve power while others don’t. But in a culture of demagoguery, we’re all contributing in our ways. That, at least, is a central claim we are making in this issue.

What this does *not* mean is that all rhetoric or all public debate is demagoguery. Nor does it mean that all demagoguery is equally harmful or equally detestable (some scholars, including contributors here, even suggest that demagoguery has a potential positive connotation). What it does mean, however, is that we cannot simply content ourselves to find “the demagogue” in our midst and purge him or her. Ousting Cleon does not magically restore Athens’ rhetorical, democratic fitness. Rather, it means we must continuously learn and relearn to engage in public deliberation that is not demagogic (or that is positively demagogic) and teach each other to value democratic deliberation in arguments about public policy. In other words, our responsibility is not just to oppose demagogues, but to oppose demagoguery and to actively intervene to make demagogic rhetoric less effective in culture—including, and maybe especially, among rhetors with whom we agree. We (the editors) use “our” and “we” advisedly here because demagoguery implicates us all.

In truth, when defined in the way we’re using it here, we all use demagoguery to varying degrees because it is incredibly effective. The promises of “stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric” are comforting, especially in moments when we’re feeling

particularly unstable or vulnerable or overtaxed. Demagoguery saves us time (we know what the right answer is because we know who the good people are), it unquestionably works (it wins presidential elections, for example), and it strengthens our sense of self-righteousness (we are fighting the good fight against evil actors). Plus, it just feels good to be on the “right side” of an issue. As a consequence, even in the act of opposing demagoguery we can easily fall into the rhetorical and epistemological patterns that support it—“us” vs. “them” thinking, apocalyptic tropologies, “unidimensional” argumentation (Carpenter), and more. These patterns are mutually reinforcing, easy to identify when “they” are engaging in them, and even easier to ignore when “we” are benefitting from them.

But ultimately, if we hope to lessen, fix, or at least temper demagoguery in our culture(s), it cannot be strictly a “they” problem. Demagoguery is also an “us” problem because it can only be addressed with “us” solutions. And that means embracing a painful, all-encompassing “we”: *we* have contributed to a rhetorical culture in which demagoguery is effective, and *we* are responsible for reshaping our rhetorical culture. If *we* are going to “cure” our politics of demagoguery, *we* need to look not only at demagogues themselves, but also at ways *we* each engage in democratic deliberation—or not—every day.

As it happens, this is a project that demands the kind of scholarly analysis rhetoricians perform. We have never been more relevant. Rhetoricians are well-positioned and well-trained to describe what demagoguery is, where it resides, how it works rhetorically, and how we might resist it. And that is the project this issue intends to advance. Ironically, the essays assembled here represent first steps in a twenty-five hundred year old journey. The goal is to establish a new agenda for scholars of demagogic rhetoric—one that invites a variety of approaches to defining, complicating, identifying, and fighting demagoguery; one that teaches us to notice demagoguery when “they” do it, but also one that teaches us to notice ourselves and our associates when “we” are engaged in demagoguery and engage differently; and ultimately one that teaches us how to build habits, processes, and self-assessments over time that support democratic deliberation and weaken demagoguery where it takes root.

The five essays collected in this issue, then, are preliminary, tentative, uncertain steps down these various paths.

In “They Probably Did Something to Deserve It: Demagoguery, Charismatic Leadership, and the Just World Model,” Patricia Roberts-Miller examines the connection of demagoguery to predominant discourses in American culture—particularly those that circulate in business and industry. Through a survey of popular management literature, Roberts-Miller demonstrates that charismatic leadership—in which “the leader is divinely inspired, almost supernaturally wise and powerful, and singularly capable of leading the in-group out of its despairing situation”—is closely aligned with authoritarianism and demagoguery. Charismatic leaders simplify decision-making, they inspire with unassailable “vision,” and they make the people who join them feel powerful. Roberts-Miller connects charismatic leadership to just-world ethics to make the case that when a particular culture invests in models of decision-making that privilege in-group identity and outcomes-based ethics, that culture is ripe for demagoguery. And in an argumentative culture that’s ripe for demagoguery, a demagogue is inevitably going to come to power.

In “Using Democracy Against Itself: Demagogic Rhetoric as an Attack on Democratic Institutions,” Ryan Skinnell argues that a defining characteristic of demagogic rhetoric is an appeal to radical democracy—what Aristotle calls “extreme democracy” or “rampant democracy”—to undermine the constraining functions of democratic institutions. Distinguishing

between tyrants and demagogues (aspirational tyrants), Skinnell argues that people who use demagogic rhetoric sow distrust in the rule of law by sowing distrust in the democratic institutions that protect it. Ultimately, anti-institutional rhetoric helps foster a culture of demagoguery that makes democracy and deliberation seem corrupt and decadent and makes authoritarianism seem sober and curative.

In “Dangerous Demagogues and Weaponized Communication,” Jennifer R. Mercieca complicates the idea of the demagogue as “aspirational tyrant” by offering a distinction between the “heroic demagogue,” who has a genuine commitment to the interests of the populace, and the “dangerous demagogue,” who exploits populist rhetoric solely for their own personal gains. Mercieca argues that dangerous demagogues can be recognized (1) by their use of “weaponized communication,” which is “the strategic use of communication as an instrumental tool and as an aggressive means to gain compliance and avoid accountability,” and (2) by their refusal to take accountability for weaponizing communication and its resulting harm. The dangerous demagogue engages the out-group through *ad hominem attacks* and *ad baculum threats*, rejects the consent required for rhetorical argumentation, and balks at invitations to engage in genuine democratic deliberation.

In “The Blood of Patriots: Symbolic Violence and ‘The West,’” CV Vitolo-Haddad focuses on “the meso-level organization of individuals motivated by their shared identification with a symbolic struggle against an imagined Other.” Using the specific case of the Proud Boys, a far-right, proto-fascist, fraternal organization, Vitolo-Haddad contends that the combination of fascist-leaning media personalities, a culture of voluntary social associations (like the Proud Boys) organized around the media personalities’ discourse, and a hyper-factionalized media environment create the aesthetic conditions for a culture of demagoguery. Specifically, demagogic rhetoric that romanticizes the supposed values of “The West”—including patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, and white supremacy—also romanticizes (and authorizes) violence and injustice against anyone perceived to be non-normative. The aesthetic conditions Vitolo-Haddad identifies mimic democratic deliberation but ultimately privilege demagoguery.

Finally, in “Rethinking Rhetorical Education in Times of Demagoguery,” Michael J. Steudeman warns rhetoricians about the ways aggressive pedagogical resistance to demagoguery can in fact contribute to a demagogic culture. Analyzing “moments of demagogic ascendance” in America’s history, Steudeman demonstrates how teachers, in response to anxieties about political engagement, have commonly fixated on “ignorance” that makes voters susceptible to manipulation. Their defensive scapegoating of “the ignorant” can have the paradoxical result of deepening the politics of resentment through alienation and heightening the culture of demagoguery. In order to resist this pattern, Steudeman invites those resisting demagoguery to start by approaching the issue with an attitude that embraces doubt, contradiction, and frustration—an attitude of love—in its unceasing fight against demagoguery.

Ultimately, the authors here do not expect to solve demagoguery. It has proven quite resilient for more than two thousand years. It will likely last as long as democracy does. But they do issue the call for rhetoricians to reinvest in what is one of the signature issues of our political moment. And they offer some suggestions for how to take up the work.

## **Acknowledgements**

The editors want to thank San José State University’s Office of Research for supporting this project through a Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity Grant. Likewise, we would like to thank SJSU’s Humanities and the Arts Dean, Shannon Miller, and Chair of English, Noelle Brada-Williams, for their support of the project in material and psychic ways. We would also like to thank the contributors for their care and attention, and perhaps most importantly, their punctuality. Finally, we’d like to thank Robin Jensen and the two anonymous reviewers for their impossibly valuable feedback and guidance. It’s a much better issue for their insights.

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