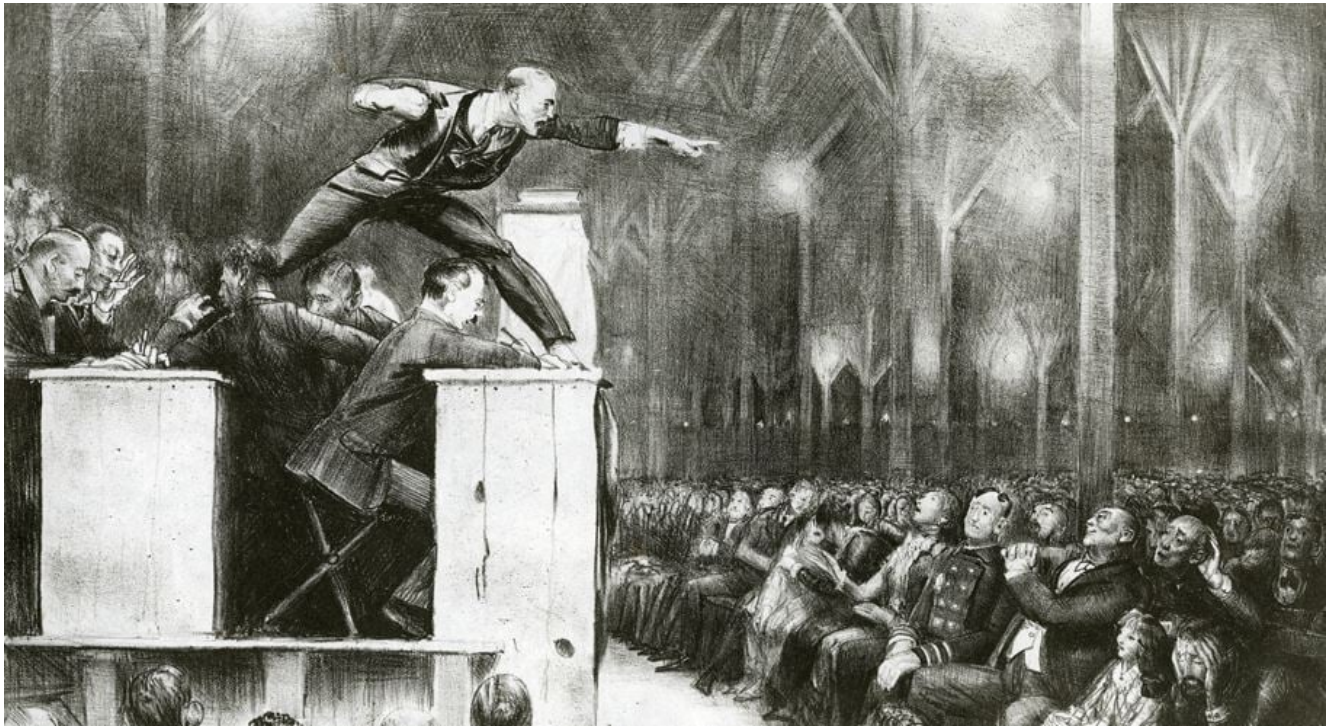


# Comparing Rhetorical Domains

*with Particular Reference to President Trump and the Neo-Stalinoids* <sup>1</sup>

by [James Como](#) (August 2020)



Billy Sunday, George Bellows, 1923

## 1.

**Comparative Literature** has been around a very long time. It routinely takes into account differences in cultures, epochs and genres, and it is supple enough—these days trendy enough—to adjust to theories of Gender, Queerness, Feminist, Critical and the like. The same, however, is hardly true of Comparative Rhetoric, even though we compare rhetorics compulsively: this pope compared to that, this prime minister v. that president, CNN now contrasted with CNN pre-Trump,

Lucrezia Borgia and Hillary Clinton (I couldn't resist). Though philosophical and longitudinal surveys of world-wide rhetorics exist,[\[2\]](#) they are few and highly abstract.

This, even though rhetorical criticism *per se* has a long history, along with its critical paradigms: Kenneth Burke's dramatistic structure, Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelianism analysis, Formalist, Structuralist, Frankfurt-Marxist, and good old Freudian—among others. But none is explicitly useful *comparatively* and is often welded to an ideological agenda.

That is owing, I believe, to a certain crudeness of those critical instruments. In his "The Rhetorical Situation" Lloyd Bitzer has taught that such a situation has an 'imperfection marked by urgency'—the itch needing a scratch. That *exigency* is satisfiable only by rhetoric. Marshall McLuhan tells us that rhetoric arises when a figure stands *against the ground*, without which interplay "no art or knowledge is possible . . . It is the essence of formal causality."

So, if the *lack* of a useful paradigm for comparative rhetorical criticism is *our* exigency, then the response must be the discovery (beyond the usual speech-setting analysis) of some hermeneutically powerful *ground*, versatile but delimited. I propose 1. to describe that useful paradigm, then in light of it 2. informally to look at some rhetorics: distantly past, proximately past, and current, and—full disclosure— 3. to fulminate.

More than an agglomeration of words, rhetoric is a set of tools ('proofs') marshaled tactically for a specific persuasive purpose, directed at a particular audience, under specific circumstances. The range of particularity and specificity vary enormously, from a single family to a whole civilization, from a single utterance to a body of variegated discourse occurring over decades, even centuries (e.g.

'medieval rhetoric'). Rhetorical criticism must take these variations into account.

My proposal of a *Domain* with three axes might do that, allowing the *comparison of domains*—the *ground*—rather than merely of this or that bit of discourse. The x-axis is *time*. Along this axis, from minutes on up to historical periods, we can stretch, contract, or designate intervals (including intervals of varying lengths), as long as we are specific and consistent. Given our clocks, calendars and chronological lexicons we should be untroubled.

The y-axis is more demanding. It is a *segmented column* describing *spheres of human interaction*. It consists (from the bottom up) of culture, nation, society, state, and government.[\[3\]](#) We should not be fooled by the language. Not just nation-states but all organized human activity (e.g. a family) exhibits this structure, even if the vocabulary is foreign to conventional usage. Each of these strata evince widely varying expectations, conventions, and other elements of an often-unwritten social contract which a rhetor satisfies, violates, or sometimes bypasses. They arise, flourish, fade, and finally (in some cases) disappear entirely. In fact, whole sets come, go and overlap each other. (Think of the changes in our lifetime of permissible and impermissible language.[\[4\]](#))

This formulation assumes that each stratum of the y-axis is an *information system* which ought to allow newness or is otherwise marked by noise and therefore entropic—a closed reality (e.g. North Korea, Cuba, some Old World families, our Cancel Culture). The flexibility of the elements of the social contract determines the receptivity of the stratum to information (by definition something new). Moreover, all strata have 'incorrigibles,' those conventions so utterly embedded in common practice and belief (and for so long) that they have the force of nature. These elements (resembling *algorithms*, incorrigible or not) wind their up and down the

entire pillar. They permute our behavior.

Challenging these is bold indeed, and for a critic the task is daunting. Each stratum, with its assortment of elements within its own social contract, together form a *hypothetical reality*, a quotidian consciousness that takes itself for granted (at least until challenged). For example, from the bottom up, Americans are largely a freedom-valuing people. (The mere language of 'quarantine,' 'lock-down,' and 'sequester' gives most of us a rash.)

The z-axis, like the conventional model deriving from the Ancients, has *three types of rhetoric*. But here my thinking departs significantly from that typology. There we have these types: epideictic (ceremonial, ascribing praise or blame and thus heavily dependent upon value judgments), forensic (factual, formulating arguments for or against a proposition), and deliberative (explanatory, usually devoted to policy and most often combining the other two forms). Alternatively, my taxonomy of discourse is: *confirmational* (keep smoking but change brands), *utilitarian* (stop smoking), *syntactical* (get others to stop smoking and get rid of cigarettes).

The first changes no norms, the second reverses a pre-existing norm, the third changes the very structure—the syntax—of the region: new norms for old, or none. Farewell incorrigible. It *compels* newness, i.e. information, starting at the bottom and working up. In short, having a strong *dysenropic* tendency, it attacks the hypothetical reality, replacing it with a new one. And so there we have a Domain: a period of time, a segment of organized human interaction, a type of discourse. If we care to compare discourses, let us first describe the whole domain within which we are comparing, apples to apples.

Consider this broad, brief example: American and French revolutionary rhetoric, from 1765 (The Stamp Act in the American colonies) to 1799 (the accession of Napoleon). The designation 'revolutionary' makes them sound the same, and we know the period as 'revolutionary'.

In fact, though both revolutions and their discourse were varyingly syntactical (nothing is more syntactical than "we the people"), ours *was not aimed at culture*, as was the French (and the Russian, and our Woke revolution). We did not re-name months and close churches, nor did we export our revolution to change any other pyramid (even if many others looked to copy ours). Thus did Jefferson, but *not* Burke, mistake the French Revolution. Moreover, insofar as we already were a separate people (from the top down) we had already had our 'revolution', actually an evolution over a very long period of time. Bernard Bailyn wrote that "the primary goal of the American Revolution . . . was not the overthrow or even the alteration of the existing social order but the preservation of political liberty." Our war really *can* be better labeled a War of Independence.

More proximately we can look, again briefly, at Ronald Reagan, say from the early seventies to the end of the eighties. His radio addresses (*In His Own Hand*) reveal the consistency of his dysentropic thinking, from his emphasis on religious motifs (unorthodox in postmodern political discourse), to his aggressive optimism (a world apart from Jimmy Carter's 'malaise' imagery), on to his triumphalist faith in individual enterprise and Western values of freedom and democracy (which many on both sides of the Atlantic saw as *morally equivalent* to the values and practices of the totalitarian Soviet Union).

In Reagan's case, such syntactical rhetoric was largely national and cultural. Moreover, Reagan understood that the deeper the hyper-orthodoxies being attacked, the more unambiguous his rhetoric must be—unambiguous, not rude.

Typical of that understanding are his two most famous speeches, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Evangelicals (March 8, 1983, the "evil empire" speech, so-called) and "Remarks at the Brandenburg Gate (June 12, 1987, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall") –both regarded at the time by large swathes of the commentariat as absurdly, irresponsibly provocative–recklessly dysentropic–in their detachment from reality, but now artifacts of an entirely new reality Reagan helped create.

Two other globally important rhetors took approaches almost identical to Reagan's. The first was Margaret Thatcher, who upended business-as-usual in her island kingdom (with special reference to labor unions) and joined Reagan in his un-euphemistic assault on the Soviet Union. The second, though, was more important even than the Iron Lady; that was Pope John Paul II. In his Harvard address ("A World Split Apart") Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn tore Western values to pieces dysentropically–*on the basis of religious premises*. Though he was most courteous in his tone, he was nevertheless patronized, scolded, dismissed or demonized by large sections of the intelligentsia presumably for not respecting a deeply-embedded value: the secular nature of American *society*.

The pope went him several better, but philosophically. He entreated (e.g. *Crossing the Threshold*) people to 'existare', that is, to stand out from the State and Society into the non-conformity of moral conviction—to "be not afraid" –thus becoming *perpetually new figures* who show that *politics and economies are not the engines of history*, an astonishingly syntactical admonition. All three rhetors address Nation and Culture, variously. Each was seeking to pump information into the system, information that would radically upset the hyper-orthodoxies–the 'incorrigibles' –of the day. Each succeeded. [\[5\]](#)

Can that be said of President Trump who, in his own way, is attempting the same sort of dysentropic achievement? None of the prior three radicals was his or her own worst enemy, picking unnecessary fights from behind a wall of very thin skin, recklessly free-associating aloud (and inarticulately so), and wearing a ring that must be kissed. Reagan once said (perhaps unoriginally, but I'd never heard it before he said it), "there's no telling what a man can accomplish if he's willing to forgo the credit." Is there any credit, real or imagined, that President Trump will not merely forgo but not claim for himself? (By the way, Obama was almost as bad.)

When descriptive ("Chinese virus," which, really, would be better as "Chinese Communist virus") and not merely insulting ("shithole countries") his dysentropic sorties have sometimes been refreshing—we just never know what's coming, and so his rhetoric becomes a zero-sum game, at best. From hyperbole unrecognized as such, to falsehoods that are hyperbolic, to unexplained hypotheses which, though not lies, are presented as fact, on to much unrelenting exhibitionism, chip-on-the-shoulder aggressiveness (often compelling him to punch down) —all this and more make him, I think, the worst communicator ever to occupy the presidency: he is a stranger to distinctions and nuance and has shown no inclination or ability to explain them when he sees them. As such, he (with his thuggish sparring partners in the Mainstream Media) damages every level of the pyramid, so that a voter must ask: has Donald Trump reached the point of diminishing returns?

Actually, most of the president's remarks (i.e. not from a prepared text) are best seen as "social gestures" (or, better, "socio-cultural gestures"), what I. A. Richards has called "phatic communion," little more than grunts. His big problem is that only a minority of people (his base) see them as such: after all, *presidents do not grunt!* The bigger problem is the infectiousness of such communication—and that



it conduces to meta-talk. So pundits and their ilk *talk* about Trump's *talk*, phatically, calling and raising his grunts with mega-grunts, and so forth (and, with an excess of zeal, continue to build strawmen).

Few exchanges are prudential, and the action becomes *symbolic action*, the "dancing of an attitude" (to cite Kenneth Burke citing Richards). However, since humans, though symbol-users, are not themselves symbols, rhetorical habits become ubiquitously toxic, "diseased speech," from the bottom up. Parties to the fray forget a very basic law of effective human communication, which our three heroes never forgot: "*It's not about me.*"

As he seeks to drain a swamp sorely in need of draining and make great again a Nation whose destiny is very, very far from done, he should look to the 'incurables' of State and Government and do what for him, apparently, is utterly impossible, *submit to them*, becoming 'presidential', an aspect of 'professional'. Two rules of communication apply: intent never equals impact, and you get what you give. Or as the teachers of fiction-writing put it, show rather than tell, stopping the self-talk, invective, and frequently random tweets.

A last word on this. If the election *is* a referendum on the president, make it a two-way street. (One-way streets are a very big problem: you want reparations? Then let's do a bit of double-column bookkeeping) —a referendum not on a person or persons but between the *Weltanschauungs* of the Moderate Center and wanton, riotous progressivism, because *the mind-set of moderation is the core of the Nation and of its Culture*. Then if people do not want to vote Trump, they can at least, by pulling the lever next to the name, vote for the *Center*. Most voters would make the *confirmational*, rather than the *syntactic*, choice (the S.O.B.s: Sanders-Ocasio-Biden). Yes, yes: the fly in this particular ointment (think both versions of the classic horror film) is Trump himself, and we can hold



our noses only so long and so tightly. His withdrawal, like LBJ's on March 31, 1968, would solve the problem and serve the higher good. But can he discern any beyond a slogan?

#### 4.

Self-aggrandizement only *seems* to be the opposite of finger-pointing, any pointer trying hard to make it about someone else. The motive, though, is the same: to promote the *self* (the pointing displacing blame). This seems especially true of our Current Normal, the Rhetoric of Riot, indulged by the neo-Stalinoids—from the social justice warriors to the cancel culturists to Antifa and on to the greatest con group going, Black Lives Matter.[\[6\]](#) (I recall Malcolm X warning against the con man, the “greatest threat to America.”) First let me acknowledge the genius of the latter: the title *per se* is something no one can disagree with, can say with a clear—even a cleansing—conscience and at the same time seem to be endorsing the organization: rather like tissues being called *un kleenex* in many South American countries. Blow gunk out of your nose or out of your guilty conscience and you have an advertisement.

The *topoi* of the Rhetoric of Riot are old : *guilt*, *victimhood*, *rotten at the root* (the Man, the Establishment, White Privilege, Jews, of course), *righteous rage*, and *absolutism* (“burn it down”). Tactics require a flag issue (e.g. George Floyd's murder); *mass gatherings* of any kind (including attacks on respected symbols, from the flag to statues to the OK finger gesture); *accusations* (‘appropriation’); *slogans* of course (preferably chantable); fellow-traveling appeasement; secrecy (funding, organization chart: very important—we need floodlights and names!