

The Critique of Domination and the Critique of Freedom: A Gramscian Perspective

Commentary

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This article recounts the significance of Raymie McKerrow’s article “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis” for scholars in the field of communication studies. In contrast to the Foucauldian stance on domination and freedom put forward by McKerrow, I argue that the Marxist and antifascist activist Antonio Gramsci offers an account of domination and freedom in the theory of hegemony that is internally consistent. In addition to its coherence, hegemony theory is rooted in historical materialist practice that urges challenges to capitalism as a system rather than exercising contingent judgments without a clear goal, or telos. Gramsci’s “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” is an urgent corrective to the “critique of freedom” and poststructuralist thought more generally in the present political moment.

Keywords: Raymie McKerrow, critical rhetoric, ideology, hegemony, Antonio Gramsci, Marxism, labor, social movements

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Date submitted: 2018-02-17

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"I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will."

—Antonio Gramsci (1929/2011)

I came upon Raymie McKerrow's (1989) signal essay "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis" during the heady days of my PhD program at the University of Iowa. In the late 1980s, graduate students would greet new publications of this import with a sort of panic: We would run into each other in the kitchen/lounge space and harangue one another about the Big Ideas on offer. In 1989, I lingered in that space for Kent Ono, John Sloop, or any other rhetoric student un/lucky enough to walk by to talk about "critical rhetoric."

McKerrow's article was an eloquent and impressive attempt to reconcile the contending critical traditions of Marxism and poststructuralism for rhetoric. As such, it rightly generated a great deal of excitement. We had all been immersed in the contestation of Marxist and post-Marxist (and structuralist and poststructuralist) theories. We were relentlessly polemical (or perhaps I should just speak for myself). McKerrow's article attempted to reconcile the modernist and postmodernist camps by combining two forms of critique, which were to make up the standpoint of the critical rhetorician.

McKerrow's call to engaged critical scholarship was very exciting. Resonating with Ricoeur's challenge to a critical approach dominated by suspicion (namely, Marxism), McKerrow emphasized how power operates across a spectrum of discourses that should be regarded as constitutive of power and its circulation. On the whole, the essay attempted to reconcile rhetoric and its previous commitments to representation, influence, and causality with an approach that recognizes discourse as a material generator of power-as-truth in a "relativized world." This second approach was largely based on the incorporation of arguments about power/knowledge made by Michel Foucault.

In this article, I first recount McKerrow's claims in his "Critical Rhetoric" essay and subsequent debates in rhetorical studies. Second, I argue that there is an alternative, more grounded, theoretically consistent, and politically practical combination of the critique of domination and the critique of freedom. This alternative can be derived from the theoretical writings of Italian communist Antonio Gramsci in his arguments about hegemony, civil society, and the role of intellectuals in counterhegemonic intervention. Third, I discuss rhetorical and cultural studies' uptake of Gramsci and the problematic tendency toward relativism in this work. Like McKerrow, Gramsci (1971) noted that history is a process of the emergence of the conditions of the possibility of freedom from the struggle over the domain of necessity, or domination (p. 367). I explore this tension in Gramsci in order to honor McKerrow's investment in a project of explicitly emancipatory critical practice while questioning critical rhetoric as the vehicle for that project.

Reading McKerrow's Critical Rhetoric—Then and Now

According to McKerrow, the critique of domination, best expressed in the Marxist tradition of ideology critique, focuses on how ruling elites craft and circulate ideas contrary to the interests of ordinary people in order to sustain a regime's hegemony. McKerrow (1989) writes, "The critique of domination has an emancipatory purpose—a telos toward which it aims in the process of demystifying relations of

domination" (p. 91). This tradition, as represented by McKerrow, emphasizes how the rhetoric of the powerful, dispensed as ideology, lies and therefore gestures toward something like an emancipatory truth.

In contrast, the critique of freedom acknowledges that, in the ostensible absence of objective interests and in the contingency of counterhegemonic alignment, "truths" are what we should watch out for: Regimes of knowledge, as Foucault pointed out, discipline subjects in productive ways that are not commensurate with simple lies. Indeed, in a relativized world, there can be no meaningful distinction between truth and lies; there is only power. This perspective "has as its telos the prospect of permanent criticism" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 92). The critique of freedom, then, is the description and contingent assessment of what truths that power produces in a spirit of perpetual critique. McKerrow sought to combine these critiques "to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change" (p. 91).¹

McKerrow's (1989) combination of these two philosophical and critical models has been generative for the field of rhetorical studies. The critique of freedom, particularly, is among the earliest iterations of a Foucauldian rhetoric in our discipline. It brings a historical perspective to our understanding of how complex and multilayered discourses of pervasive power over long periods of time are productive of lived social relations. McKerrow understands Foucault as agnostic on the means and ends of social change while enabling a critique such that "the possibility of revolt is opened" (p. 97). Out of the critiques of domination and freedom, McKerrow proposes a number of principles for critical and political praxis. Among these is the idea that "the discourse of power is material" (p. 102)—or, in other words, ideology exists in rhetorical form that has effects on the social world.

As a budding Marxist, I was joyfully incensed by the encounter with McKerrow's argument. Michael McGee (1982) had already been arguing along similar lines against Marxist historical materialism, advancing the argument that "rhetoric is material," by which he and others making that case actually meant "rhetoric is real" or "rhetoric matters"—in contrast to a theory of materialism that was about situating texts in historical and economic contexts as explanation for their social force. The "posts" were running rampant across the humanities, seeking their own hegemony and displacing what I saw to be the necessity of realism and foundationalism to struggles for social change. At that time, I argued the proposition that there are truths outside of discourse that may be appealed to as a check on mystification. More recently, I have emphasized an agreement with McKerrow that "rhetoric constitutes *doxastic* rather than *epistemic* knowledge" (Cloud, 2018; McKerrow, 1989, p. 105). *Doxa* or prevailing social knowledge, or common sense, is a rhetorical product; there are no extradiscursive checks without interpretation through the doxastic. I still believe, however, that a foundational sense of class relationships can avoid the relativism of reducing all truths to discourse. I explore this idea below.

¹ McKerrow brings together these philosophical traditions that are often regarded as incommensurable by adopting a version of the critique of domination that replaces the centrality of class as an objective relation with an idea of "the people," who, without specific class belonging, struggle for hegemony (p. 94).

But at that moment, being hotheaded and full of myself, I crafted a polemical response titled "The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron" (Cloud, 1994). There, I argued that McGee represented the logically impossible "idealist materialist" on the basis of his argument that rhetoric was the historical driver of social stability and change without reference to economic or geopolitical interests as conditioning the production of texts and cultures. McKerrow, I argued, was, in an oxymoronic formulation, a "relativist materialist." About his essay, I wrote,

What McKerrow's language obscures is the possibility that the critique of domination and the critique of freedom are mutually contradictory in the task of ideology criticism. We cannot talk about unmasking repressive, dominating power without some understanding of reality and oppression. . . . The project of describing rhetoric as *doxa* finds itself at odds with a project that seeks to expose the naturalized common sense of a people as ideology obscuring certain features of material reality. (Cloud, 1994, p. 155)

For me, materialism as a philosophical stance was closely linked to realism; that is, the material refers to objectively existing economic and social relations, contested by blocs in possession of real class-based interests (based on standpoint, not identity) seeking to win a new hegemony (which, at that point, would not be "counter"). The world, I argued, was not so relativized as the critique of freedom might indicate. In a critique of the propaganda (a concept with realist assumptions) of the (first) Persian Gulf War (1991), I urged attention to how significant the critique of domination—of rhetorical production in the interest of elites—should remain if we were to retain criteria for judgment and action.

McKerrow clarified his project in a response to his critics (Hariman, 1991; McKerrow, 1991; Ono & Sloop, 1992), some of whom had noted a modernist commitment to normative struggle (which McKerrow admits) lurking in the encounter between critiques of domination and freedom. He also responded to charges (ironically, from scholars who were not activists) that his project was overly academic. Most importantly, he answers Charland's (1991) challenge that "the infinite regress of a negative critique implies the absence of a positive stance (or any stance at all)" (McKerrow, 1991, p. 76). McKerrow responds that to argue that power relations are relative allows that "in specific historical moments . . . one set of power relations is better than another" (p. 76). As I will observe, there must be some criterion by which critics and activists decide what set of power relations is better than any other.

Over the years to follow, Ronald Walter Greene (1998) enjoined me and other Marxists in debates over rhetoric and materiality/materialism in compelling work operating within a Foucauldian modality (Cloud, 2006; Cloud, Macek, & Aune, 2006). In 2006, I rearticulated in more mature form the arguments against relativism and idealism, this time grounding my observations in the work of Antonio Gramsci. I explained that Gramsci's "interest in the hegemonic process is first and foremost a critique of how a ruling class wins the 'consent' of ordinary people against their own, real, class interests. Further, Gramsci theorized the production of a class-based counterhegemony" (Cloud, 2006, p. 339).² An Italian communist revolutionary jailed under

² As other scholars have noted, Gramsci did not use the term *counterhegemony*, instead recognizing that oppositional forces vying for power are crafting the terms of a new hegemony. However, until the opposition to capitalist rule succeeds in supplanting capitalism and its state, their terms cannot become hegemonic. In

Mussolini, Gramsci was a Marxist (and critiqued dominant class rule and consciousness) but no structuralist. He also observed and theorized how ordinary people engage discourse in the course of struggle to displace commonsense ideologies and organize systematic opposition to capitalist rule.

His was a critique of both domination and freedom, but without relativist antifoundationalism. Imprisoned and in ill health, Gramsci nevertheless wrote prolifically about politics and social movements in journals smuggled out from the jail. His writings, compiled in *The Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 1971), analyzed Italian and global politics, using code and metaphor from Italian political history to comment on resistance to fascist rule and to capitalism in “democratic” societies. He also wrote about the importance of intellectuals in engaging social change.

The project of counterhegemonic struggle requires timely rhetorical intervention in both immediate (intentional, interventionist) and ideological contexts (in which common sense is produced and contested). These capacities of a politician/rhetor/organizer require a domain of action apart from the state in which to struggle over consciousness as/in/as power.

Hegemony and Civil Society: Sites for Rhetorical Intervention

Gramsci (1971) defined hegemony as rule, in ostensibly democratic (rather than authoritarian) societies, by a dominant power on the basis of the consent of the ruled. On the one hand, Gramsci did not suggest that consent is a matter of free will; rather, it is heavily constrained by the authority of elites and their access to sense-making apparatuses. On the other hand, Gramsci positions political organizations (specifically working-class and socialist organizations) and their intellectuals as agents of the distribution of a critical consciousness to fuel movements for social change. This opening for critique and influence is a place for communicative intervention. Although Gramsci did not employ the term *counterhegemony* per se, he did describe how, under certain conditions, organizations and leaders—organic intellectuals³—can generalize a new, oppositional common sense along with organizing oppositional blocs to capitalist rule. Hegemony is always in flux and contested; it is a site of struggle on multiple fronts of varying degrees of consciousness and organization and around multiple demands and issues.

Contrary to the structuralist pessimism and antihumanism characteristic of Althusserian Marxism, Gramsci argued for both ruthless critique of capitalism and its relations and energetic organizing against it (Rosengarten, 2014, p. 15). While some theorists of cultural hegemony increasingly relied on Gramsci to warrant a turn toward popular culture and its reception as sites of contestation over meaning and representation, it is important to note that Gramsci himself did not advocate such a turn. The challenge to

the reformist and revolutionary movements short of that goal, it makes sense to use the commonplace term *counterhegemony* to describe efforts to shift common sense and build oppositional political organization.

³ Organic intellectuals are the organizing voices emergent from struggles, as opposed to the position of “traditional intellectuals,” who, isolated and distant from movements, produce knowledge that is out of touch with the historical moment and the contestation characterizing it.

capitalist rule, he argued, comes in the form of social movements, both conjunctural (in what Gramsci called the “war of position,” or contestation over culture) and economic coercion alongside a challenge to the capitalist state (the “war of maneuver”; Gramsci, 1971, pp. 108–110; 1988, pp. 222–245).

While capitalist society is buttressed by ideologies, its stability is a product of both coercive force and cultural persuasion. The presence of civil society in “democratic” states affords space and opportunity for agents of change to conduct the conjunctural war of position aimed at self-development and self-defense. The war of maneuver—economic pressure and revolutionary coercion—is not out of the question but requires preparation, much of which happens on the level of consciousness. The state and the corporate interests that are served by it are real sites of influence. But ordinary people negotiate their agency in both the conjunctural and revolutionary struggle.

Gramsci speaks about culture and politics as realms where the masses are won to “consent” to the rule of the powerful. The concept of common sense refers to how the interests of elites are naturalized and universalized as national or global interests. But he also notes that counterhegemonic blocs are formed and can win the consent of large numbers of people to movements for social change. The movements must connect to one another, which is a fundamentally rhetorical project. Under certain historical circumstances, such blocs contest in electoral and political arenas for power and can win both reforms and revolution (when they would become the hegemonic bloc). For all that Gramsci is heralded for insights into cultural struggle, he argued that the aim of movements was eventually to craft a broad and mass-supported movement that could take state power. Part of this work is exposing the neutrality and democratic character of state power as a sham. And civil society—the domain of society allegedly removed from the direct influence by the state—is its secret: both the pretense of democratic rule and the site of counterhegemonic organization.

Civil society is where oppositional politics are developed—a process that does not happen spontaneously but rather through the intervention of organized political forces such as political parties (understood beyond the U.S. context as including parties representing a variety of class formations; Gramsci, 1971, p. 267). Because history is a struggle between rulers and ruled, and because rulers have established the rationale for their dominance in culture, education, and politics, the ruled must educate themselves to become conscious that their “consent” to be governed by another class’s power is neither spontaneous nor in their interests. Radical working-class education is necessary to this process. Ordinary people thus become conscious leaders of movements that can take advantage of moments of instability and crisis.

Marxist theorist Peter Thomas (2011) argues that we need a reconsidered Gramsci for our struggles today. The versions of Gramsci’s thought that are dominant in the academic humanities, he argues, have been distorted by Althusser, who twisted the Gramscian paradigm into an idealist, antihumanist, and pessimistic version of itself, which then was taken up by communication, literary, and cultural scholars and rhetoricians ever after. Perry Anderson, Thomas writes, equated the concept of hegemony with bourgeois power, and I would argue that he is still doing so.⁴ Anderson, Thomas argues, also misinterprets Gramsci’s focus on the

⁴ Anderson’s (2017) book *The H-Word* charts the philosophical and geographic history of the word’s variegated meanings. He contextualizes the term *hegemony* as it has been used to describe major powers and their empires rather than as a philosophical concept, which is refreshing, as the book is ultimately a critique of both national and imperial rule to the present day. What distinguishes the term from the words

capacity of a ruling class to legitimate its rule in civil society. In contrast, Gramsci argued that ordinary people can also use civil society to educate and organize people in their own interests in social movements that are constitutive of counterhegemonic blocs that can wield both persuasive and coercive power. As movements radicalize, they can challenge nationalism and the state.

Thus, Gramsci offers a way for rhetoric to understand both the critique of domination and the critique of freedom in an internally coherent theory of hegemonic struggle on the terrain of civil society. Gramsci's thought enables us to consider the role of culture and political discourse in managing popular consent to a particular system of rule while also understanding how the sites of such discourse production and circulation also serve the purposes of counterhegemonic blocs. With regard to domination and freedom in dark times, Gramsci famously advocated "pessimism of the intellect" alongside "optimism of the will."

Gramsci in Communication Studies

Marco Briziarelli and Eric Karikari (2018) define the characteristics of Gramsci for communication studies as including

his drawing on the rhetorical tradition inspired by Vico, his assumptions of the constitutive role of language in creating an intersubjective reality that shapes common sense, and the fact that language provides the conditions of possibility for a hegemonic project. The strong tie between communication and Gramsci's thought creates a vantage point for understanding both how Gramsci developed his political theories based on communication concerns and how those theories in turn advanced the field of communication. . . . The common denominator of a Gramscian perspective on communication must be found in the consistent use of dialectical thinking, which mediates binarisms like diachronic–synchronic, stability–change, individual–collective, unity–diversity, and symbolic–material. (para. 1)

Other scholars in communication and cultural studies have read Gramsci as warranting a turn away from classical Marxism's emphasis on the struggle over economic and state power and toward power as it is negotiated in culture. The famous essay by Raymond Williams (1973; see also Hall, 1986) against regarding ideological, cultural, and political life as a superstructure determined necessarily and totally by an economic base (by the capitalist mode of production, for example) warranted a turn toward a "cultural materialism" that, in my view, reversed the vector of determination, emphasizing the crafting of and responding to cultural texts as the primary site of agency for ordinary people.⁵

empire, power, or rule on the one hand and *ideology or consciousness* on the other hand is, according to Anderson, the capacity to theorize the force-consciousness dualism as dialectical characteristics of discursive and coercive processes of rule.

⁵ Gramsci did reject economic determinism, but also thought Marxism itself was not deterministic: From Marx and Engels forward (until structuralist Marxism), ideas and economic power have been theorized as

Dennis Mumby (1997) argues in the context of organizational communication that Gramsci should not be read in terms of a bifurcated model of power. Mumby rejects understanding Gramsci as a theorist only of domination, positing a hegemonic order against which resistance is constrained and contained. Rather, Gramsci set out a dialectical model of domination and resistance in which hegemonic power is always contested and contestable in civil society (including the workplace)—a domain situated between ordinary people and the state where people struggle over and transform common sense in communicative practice. This practice goes well beyond interventions in the criticism of popular culture. I share Mumby's reading of Gramsci as emphasizing the dialectical interplay of domination and resistance. His argument resonates quite strongly with McKerrow's argument that we ought not see the social world as defined by domination alone.

The opening in civil society for the timely interventions of critical intellectuals and leaders of social movements is a site for rhetoric—as both a study and a practice. This vision is, as Zompetti (1997) argues, compatible with critical rhetoric as McKerrow formulated it. In recent work, I argue similarly that a Gramscian frame on domination and resistance enables critics and activists to recognize and take advantage of opportunities for intervention and organizing in social movements today (Cloud, 2018). The question still lingering in even the Gramscian amendment to the critical rhetoric project is about how one knows which side to take. If the critique of freedom is about the observation of how power produces subjects who operate in rhetorically constituted discourse formations, and if we reject a materialist standard for what comprises domination, we are left choosing among rhetorical formations.

Relativism as the Critique of Freedom

The “critique of freedom” in McKerrow's critical rhetoric calls for a historical description of discursive regimes of power alongside a spirit of permanent critique with only a contingent sense of *telos*. This model of critique relies heavily on the ideas of Michel Foucault, a poststructuralist thinker who rejected negative conceptions of power—such as those of the critique of domination—in favor of seeing discourses as productive of power in the form of knowledge regimes that regulate life without reference to a particular economic system, its agents, imperatives, and challengers.

Poststructuralist and post-Marxist critique share this antifoundationalism as an alternative to class politics specifically. In line with poststructuralism, post-Marxists have taken up the concept of hegemony, but defined not as class rule via consent but as the gathering together blocs of citizens and workers around particular reforms (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; see Squires, 2010, for a critique of the “posts” in rhetorical studies). However, rejecting the Marxist emphasis on organizing on the basis of actual economic interests, post-Marxists argue that counterhegemonic blocs come together around shared demands rather than class interests or identities, and the resulting hegemonic formation is that of “the people” rather than the class—a point that Laclau has since extended (Laclau, 2007; Laclau & Mouffe,

dialectically related (see Gramsci, 1971, pp. 377, 407). From this point of view, the critique of the base/superstructure divide overstated the degree of determinism in classical Marxism (see Cloud, 2006).

2001, pp. 65, 75–85).⁶ The result is not a class-based antagonism but rather a struggle based on articulation of people and groups around shared demands.⁷ They relativize struggle—such that any counterhegemonic formation is as good, potentially, as any other. As Feyh (2010) argues, the rendering of the material discursive and abandoning of the labor theory of value—which positions the working class as the only agency for the dismantling of capitalism—align post-Marxism with the persistence of capitalist society rather than resistance to it (p. 236).

This critique of how Laclau and Mouffe have taken up the concept of hegemony does not mean that rhetorical work is unnecessary to a revolutionary project. Indeed, in such contestation, movements, which often arise and proceed in fragments and discord, must articulate themselves together. The questions are: On what basis and in whose interests does this articulation rest? Laclau and Mouffe reject the idea of an a priori class interest prior to its rhetorical and political articulation. What is the basis of emancipatory critique and political practice if we cannot point to an oppressed and/or exploited class with objective interests in liberatory struggle?

Following Gramsci, I maintain that ordinary people together in civil society, in the course of struggle, come to critical consciousness of their situation and generalize that consciousness, leading to organization and mobilization that can challenge ruling elites. Rhetoric is crucial to understanding the persuasive and timely crafting and circulation of critical consciousness (counterhegemonic common sense). The building of networks and coalitions across difference is, likewise, largely a rhetorical project. However, engaging an emancipatory project ultimately asks the critical rhetorician (and everyone else), Which side are you on? And the foundational place of class as a relationship in capitalist society is a resource for answering that question.

Class Struggle as Resource for Critique and Action

A case in point is the Los Angeles teachers' strike in January 2019. On January 14, more than 30,000 public school teachers left their classrooms and took to the streets, demanding not only higher pay and better working conditions for teachers but also, and more centrally, smaller class sizes, health and other services for students, and an end to racist surveillance and policing in the schools. The teachers built a large and dynamic coalition of unionists, other activists, parents, community organizations and

⁶ The historical context for the emergence of post-Marxism and its political expression, Eurocommunism, is partly the disillusionment of intellectuals with Soviet "communism," or Stalinism. Another feature of the historical context is Reaganism and Thatcherism (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was first published in 1987) and the sense of defeat on the Left that resulted. See the forum on the "posts" (postracism, post-Marxism, postfeminism, etc.) edited by Catherine Squires (2010) in *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, particularly the essay by Kathleen Feyh (2010, pp. 235–237) on post-Marxism.

⁷ Mouffe (2014) has turned to the concept of agonism to describe an affirmative, affective, pluralist politics that ostensibly gets past antagonism to something I might recognize as liberal coalition building, which is not irrelevant but is insufficient for the crafting of a specifically anticapitalist hegemonic struggle. See also Tambakaki (2014).

businesses, and students. A rising number of whom Gramsci would call “organic intellectuals” and whom we might recognize as critical rhetors and rhetoricians captured social and mainstream media to respond to school district leaders and critics of their efforts. These organizers served to reinterpret discourse describing them and their work and produced an oppositional common sense that spread across the movement and across the media in an organic way. A whole generation of critical social movement rhetors was emerging, including Aryana Fields, an elementary school student who wrote and performed a “strike song” for the teachers. The melody is based on Rachel Platten’s (2015) “Fight Song.” Fields’s (2019) lyrics include the following lines:

I’m just a small voice
No emotion
Sending big love
Like a potion
Watch how a single kid
Can make their minds open
Yes I only have one voice
But I can make an explosion.

From the beginning, this student, four days into a strike, recognizes *herself* as an organizing intellectual capable of opening minds. Fields goes on to sing,

And everything that’s done for me
By my teachers daily
I will scream them out today
Will you listen to what I say?
This is a strike strong
Our education
Prove them we’re right song
Our power’s turned on
Starting right now we’ll be strong
We’ll sing this strike song
It is so critical that everybody else believes
Because I know this is exactly what I need.

The song details how the strike is for the students, clearly aimed at answering charges that the teachers have “abandoned” their students. Indeed, Fields calls her song “our education” and identifies her goal as to make everyone else “believe.” Like any number of movement leaders, spokespeople, and intellectuals who emerge from the ranks of a struggle, she is generalizing a new common sense against the interests of the powerful and in the interests of teachers and students.

It may seem to be a question with an obvious answer: How do we know (and I think that we do) that Aryana Fields is on the right side of the struggle and on the right side of history? I and a number of others

have defended a nondeterministic Marxism for communication studies that centers the working class as a relation, not an identity or essence.

On the basis of a working-class standpoint, one may assess the fidelity of social movement discourse to the interests of ordinary people (Cloud, 2018; Cloud & Feyh, 2015). In contrast, the critique of freedom in a Foucauldian or post-Marxist perspective that there is no economic base on which to found a political commitment might leave the answer to that question open. We can close it by making a commitment to telos and siding with the teachers. Is our decision to do so a matter of persuasion or articulation alone? Or is it a recognition—theory be damned—that the teachers represent a real exploited class, whose positions as such existed before the rhetoric of the union began to circulate. Rhetoric is crucial to consciousness of one's position in society, but it is not the foundation on which to evaluate the rhetoric of a dispute.

We believe Aryana Fields not only because her (and others') rhetoric is so compelling; we cheer her and the strikers on because the working class and the oppressed have taken up the available means of persuasion to make a new common sense that is more faithful to the experiences of ordinary people.⁸ The emerging and better common sense of the class struggle solidifies the commitment of strikers and supporters and mobilizes their communities, but it will not be that common sense that wins the strikers' demands from the school district. It will be the rhetoric that mobilizes our side that sustains the economic leverage of the strike weapon—which has left hundreds of schools closed, disrupted businesses that supply and support schools (many of whose workers are supporting the strike), and shut down the city center with rallies many thousands strong—to force the district's hand.

The lessons I draw from this example (beyond my sheer admiration of teachers and awe in the face of an organized working class after decades of defeat and demoralization) are that an engaged critical rhetoric requires a grounded recognition of basic economic reality and the position of groups and classes within it as real and foundational. Then a rhetoric of freedom and critical practice might emerge against actually existing domination. For there to be a critique of freedom, someone must by definition be unfree. If entire groups are unfree, then we must recognize a systematically organized class society in which ordinary people occupy real standpoints in relations of oppression and exploitation.

For a Gramscian Critique of Domination and Freedom

⁸ This alternative common sense is what Gramsci might have labeled "good sense," which affirms my earlier point that we must have some standard for distinguishing between "their" common sense (ideology) and "our" common and better sense by which activists build the necessary consciousness and will to struggle (see Forgacs' introduction to Gramsci's "Study of Philosophy," in *The Prison Notebooks*, 1971, p. 624; but see p. 626, where the editor clarifies that "common sense" refers to prevailing beliefs of society, whereas "good sense" means practical reason based on empirical reality; and p. 663, where Gramsci uses the terms somewhat interchangeably). I maintain the idea of instituting a new common sense, not good sense, in the recognition that consciousness is a matter of *doxa* not only *episteme*, or the rhetorical crafting and circulation of beliefs in the hopes that they might, in the conquest of hegemony, become "common sense." Elsewhere, I have called this quality "fidelity" (Cloud, 2018, p. 5).

In this context, the critique of freedom in a poststructuralist (relativist) frame is potentially disabling. As I wrote more than a decade ago (Cloud, 2006), a dialectical Marxism that encompasses the capacity of rhetoric for critique, consciousness, organization, and action is preferable to the internally contradictory pairing of domination and freedom in McKerrow's formulation. Critique is certainly not the simple lifting of a veil of mystification, as a reductionist version of the critique of domination would have us believe. But neither can it sustain emancipatory politics on perpetual critique. I believe that Gramsci (along with Lukács, 1968; see Cloud, 2015) is a resource for the crafting of a dialectical rhetoric that regards both domination and freedom as part of the struggle for hegemony on cultural, political, and economic terrain: an actually exploitative capitalist society inhabited by actually exploited and oppressed people who continually build movements for justice, equality, and freedom.

With Gramsci we may recognize the forces of domination by their economic investments (who benefits materially from a particular hegemonic formation), their systematic exclusions (how and why this regime of truth produces hierarchical and disenfranchising racial, gendered, and other differences), their repressive institutions (how the police and military are employed), and their ideological rationalizations for its rule (how prevailing common sense justifies power relations). In other words, we must notice that what power produces is capitalism and that power does not produce itself; rather, it is created and maintained by agents of a ruling, capitalist class. It is the standpoint—a material, economic position in society (see Cloud, 2015 Cloud & Feyh, 2015)—of the exploited and the oppressed in this situation that can be the basis for critical and activist orientation, alignment, and action.

In making this argument, I am not saying that activists, including critical rhetoricians, should lose the capacity for self-reflection and vigilance as movements emerge, grow, and succeed or fail. At the same time, we should not give up on the possibility of solidarity across differences, and a realist theory of class is helpful in this project. I recently attended the 2019 Women's March in Syracuse, New York. The march was organized and held in the context of a nationwide controversy over failures to include people of color in the organizing process and a failure to recognize the experience, oppression, and belonging of trans and gender nonbinary persons when deploying an essentialist definition of women.

In the spirit of perpetual vigilance—the recognition of multiple demands and incommensurate identities and the challenge of knitting them together rhetorically—organizers could have called off the demonstration; in some cities, that decision was the eventuality. In Syracuse, however, speaker after speaker called for solidarity in the face of difficulty and potentially even offense. Mara Sapon-Shevin, a member of Jewish Voices for Peace, noted that exclusions and silences are wounds that, when allowed to divide us, become fatal to the movement. Rahzie Seals, a leader in the Syracuse Movement for Black Lives and the Green Party, presented brief remarks about the inclusion of transwomen in the movement, calling on the audience to honor transwomen of color who had been murdered in 2017.

This moment for me signaled a standpoint that politics can address the demands and needs of the most oppressed persons in its constituency (and transwomen of color may occupy this space in the degrading system under which we live, work, and struggle). Unless it does so, it fails the test of solidarity. Black feminists,

whose voices are leading movements in the United States once again, are champions of such politics. The Combahee River Collective in 1977 described an intersectional politics of solidarity on a working-class basis:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation. We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women. (Combahee River Collective, 1977; reprinted with interviews and commentary in Taylor, 2017, p. 19).

We could do worse than to adopt an intersectional class-based standard as a realist resource for judgment in our movements and in our scholarly work.

The Place of Critical Rhetoricians in Our Historical Moment

It is in this context that, for Gramsci, intellectuals, particularly "organic" or movement intellectuals, play an important role. While traditional academics have historically served a conservative function in capitalist society, our present historical moment has called us out. The election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States has emboldened the far Right in targeting professors and campuses as sites of their struggle for cultural influence, especially over young people. Fascists and other white supremacist organizations are making unprecedented inroads into campus organizations such as CampusWatch and Turning Point USA. Recently the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported, "White supremacists are targeting college campuses like never before" (Kerr, 2018). Groups such as Identity Evropa, Patriot Front, and Vanguard America are engaged in widespread propaganda efforts, including flyers, music, demonstrations, faculty watch lists, and chalking sidewalks. Such groups are finding campuses to be fertile recruiting ground.

Similarly, targeted harassment of faculty is aimed at disciplining and silencing critical and activist intellectuals. It is natural for targeted faculty to react to such an assault—replete with threats of violence and death, gendered sexual slurs, and racist and Islamophobic epithets—as a personal, debilitating experience. However, it is important to make it clear what is really going on: It is a right-wing social movement tactic that is closely tied to other, long-term attempts to shut down the critical potential of universities. Attacks on professors are collective, social movement phenomena.

The assault also participates in a longer history of pressure on the academy to give in completely to the imperatives of neoliberal capitalism—a version of capitalism that requires greater austerity, privatization of social responsibility, massive student debt, and a resulting downward standard of living among ordinary people (see Heller, 2016; MacLean, 2018). The other thing it requires is a quiescent population. The system's advocates want to squash the creativity, energy, and openness to radical politics among the next generation of citizens. The state, the corporations, and their pundits think that they can make campuses safe for White supremacists—who are again pitching their campaigns against antiracism—opportunistically couched as “political correctness.”

The role of intellectuals in this moment is to defend what McKerrow called “the principles of praxis”: the commitment to publicly engaged criticism in the formulation and critique of ideology. I am aligned with Zampetti's (1997) argument that a Gramscian approach cuts against the potential lack of instrumentality of the critique of freedom as articulated by McKerrow. The critic, Zampetti suggests, must move beyond self-reflexive critique and enjoin movements for liberation—to “take sides” in the confrontation with oppressive power. Referring to the emergence of social movement activity especially by feminists of color, Foust (2010, p. 68) likewise expresses the concern that the politics of “perpetual critique” that characterize the critique of freedom may be nihilistic and ineffective.

Like McKerrow, I believe that rhetoricians—and rhetors—should understand the importance of engaging with *doxa*, the realm of circulating truths; it is naïve to insist on “just the facts” or assume that we can simply “speak truth to power.” We can, however, speak *power* to power in the interests of the many against the rule of the few (and the street and Internet thugs that enforce that rule). This is the argument of my recent book *Reality Bites: Rhetoric and the Circulation of Truth Claims in U.S. Political Culture* (Cloud, 2018). Elsewhere I have argued, following Lukács (1968), that the evaluation of truth claims can have a real basis in the standpoint of the collectives addressed and governed by such claims (Cloud, 2015). However, the critical method does not assume the possibility of transparent representation in emancipatory discourse; its focus is on the process of mediation that cultivates *doxa* out of disparate knowledges.

For example, the American revolutionary Thomas Paine (1776) stands out in U.S. history as a mediator of counterhegemonic knowledge that circulated as, literally, *Common Sense*. Likewise, as I argue in *Reality Bites*, organic intellectuals, most of them women of color, in today's #BlackLivesMatter movement use emerging media platforms to circulate contested truths about Black lives. Again, what begins as the experiential knowledge of an oppressed group (*episteme*) begins to circulate as common sense (*doxa*). This concept of *doxa*, or common sense, is significant to Gramsci's theory of hegemony. For Gramsci, anticapitalist struggle requires the articulation of an intersubjective set of meanings within the working class as its members (the vast majority of humanity) ready themselves for the larger struggle to eliminate class society (Coutinho, 2013, p. 75). As Coutinho writes, “For Gramsci, human consciousness is not a mere epiphenomenon; in the form of ideology, it is rather an ontologically determinant moment of the social being” (p. 76). The ideologies of the counterhegemonic struggle are not directly correspondent to an extrasubjective reality; rather, they are the articulation of political insight and program out of shared experience. The construction of a counterhegemonic *doxa* does not require a correspondence theory of

truth. It only requires the recognition that the counterhegemonic struggle is specifically against capitalism as a system of social relations.

Conclusion

Rhetoricians interested in power and resistance were rightly excited by McKerrow's intervention into debates in the field. Since the publication of his article, those of us invested in criticism and activism for social change commonly use the shorthand phrases "critical rhetoricians" and "critical rhetoric" to name who we are and what we do. McKerrow's essay framed the parameters for a crucial and ongoing debate in the field over where our critique of power should be placed: on the manufacture and disputation of lies or the production and circulation of truths. My own position is that the critique of freedom as the rhetorical constitution of truths is necessary, as my recent work on the circulation of truth claims in political culture reveals (Cloud, 2018). However, the critique of freedom can leave behind necessary material and realist commitments that enable critique rather than merely describe truth regimes.

While critical rhetoric frames the issues of domination and freedom productively, it does not pay sufficient attention to the material conditions that are the motivation for and contexts of critique. Classical Marxist approaches to communication, including that of Gramsci, not only afford critics a view of the relations of domination in capitalist society and their ideological justification; they also urge theorists and critics to look to history to discover the conditions of possibility for freedom in real, material circumstances.

In later work, McKerrow (2015) answers Marxist critics (including Aune, 2008; Cloud, 1994), arguing that a poststructuralist or postmodern approach to rhetoric does not evacuate the possibility for critical judgment and action; it merely renders them radically contingent on the rhetorical construction of meaning of social reality (see also Ono & Sloop, 1992). However, the Marxist charge against critical rhetoric is not only about its ostensible undermining of human agency in decision making and action. Importantly, its critics also are concerned with the recognition of material circumstances, historical and present, that condition the possibility of consciousness and struggle (see Coutinho, pp. 63–66). Moreover, it is imperative to devise strategies and tactics specifically aimed at challenging capitalism as an objectively material system of exploitation and oppression. Small-scale, contingent decision making in uncertain contexts will, at the end of the day, remain inadequate to the task of human emancipation.

If criteria for a just world were truly relativized—as a Foucauldian approach suggests—any truth regime, any populist appeal, any call to collectivity would be as righteous as any other. I believe that this stance is particularly dangerous at our historical moment of rising fascist ideas and organization. Now is not the time to focus only on whose truths are allowed to circulate "in the true." We must also patiently critique the discourses that warrant domination on the real basis of the interests of ordinary people. We must circulate these critiques in public culture, because we are not living in a relativized world.

In such a context, Antonio Gramsci's description of the pitching of political, economic, and cultural wars for hegemony in civil society offers a corrective to a structuralist Marxist's overweening emphasis on the critique of domination. The question becomes not what is true and what is false but rather *whose* truths get to circulate as common sense, or *doxa*. What are the conditions of possibility for "our" truths—the knowledges

and experiences of the exploited and oppressed—to establish hegemony in political culture? Gramsci argued that this goal is tied closely to the movement for hegemony in the economic domain; there is no war of position independent of plotting for the war of maneuver based on shared consciousness and determination (Gramsci, 1971, p. 185). In contrast, the critical praxis advocated by McKerrow might limit our attention to the work in and on discourses without fathoming the potential for a broader fight against the system as a whole.

It is imperative that the Left understand both the war of position and the war of maneuver, along with the strategies of both domination and resistance. Today the Right is fully cognizant of its hegemonic tasks. It has targeted our campuses in an attempt to shut down all the practices that constitute critical rhetoric. Critical intellectuals—rhetoricians among them—should attend to both attempts at domination and the production of truths in movements to counter such domination. It is the possibility and reality of our rising up that tempered Gramsci's "pessimism of the intellect" with the "optimism of the will."

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