

Democratic Dissent and the Trick of Rhetorical Critique

Robert L. Ivie
Indiana University

As an exercise in consubstantial rivalry (a notion adapted from Kenneth Burke), democratic dissent operates tactically to turn the tables on the powerful in a given cultural field of political tension (a perspective drawn from Michel de Certeau). Dissent rearticulates political relationships by an ongoing act of rhetorical critique inside an established framework of understanding. The dissenter is a rhetorical trickster deploying metaphor as a principal heuristic of critique. The possibility of credible dissent relies on achieving a certain productive tension between affirming and disconcerting the political order—a double gesture of nonconforming solidarity—as can be illustrated in recent documentaries of dissent such as *Uncovered: The War on Iraq*.

Keywords: dissent; democracy; rhetoric; critique

After September 11, 2001, the United States—its political elites, its mainstream media, and the bulk of its citizenry—assumed an attitude of war against terrorism in the name of democracy minus dissent. From the president's perspective, everyone at home and abroad faced the choice of supporting America's war or siding with the terrorists. The defense of civilization called for conformity and consensus, or so it was said and widely accepted. Dissent was rendered unpatriotic. Protest was considered rude and out of place, something appropriately relegated to remote free-speech zones. When a lone U.S. senator stood up in Congress to oppose preemptive warfare, he spoke to a nearly empty chamber (Byrd, 2004).¹

Criticism was stifled and shunted to the margins but never entirely stymied, especially when the war on terrorism morphed into a costly invasion and bloody occupation of Iraq and particularly after political elites began debating one another through an accommodating mainstream press.² Meanwhile, grassroots dissent operated more or less invisibly within a largely depoliticized con-

Author's Note: This article was prepared with the support of a Fellowship in Democracy and Dissent awarded by the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions at Indiana University, Bloomington. My thanks go to Richard B. Miller, Director of the Poynter Center and professor of Religious Studies, for organizing a year of stimulating interdisciplinary exchange and for engaging my ideas robustly and constructively.

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies, Volume 5 Number 3, 2005 276-293
DOI: 10.1177/1532708605276909
© 2005 Sage Publications

sumer society, relegated to alternative media and episodic rallies, some on a large scale but all tainted in the eyes of the general public with the mark of disloyalty.

Dissent, in short, is not a privileged act in American political culture. It struggles for legitimacy, especially in times of war and crisis, even though it enacts democratic values. Indeed, struggle is true to the character of dissent and democracy. Neither exists except as political struggle, and both are lost without struggle. The challenge of democracy, then, is to legitimize dissent, not to put an end to polemics, disputation, controversy, and contestation.

By way of example, we might turn briefly to a recently released documentary that critiques the administration's decision to invade Iraq. *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* was first a DVD and then a film aimed at influencing the 2004 presidential election by sharply challenging the administration's rationale for war, arguing that the claim of weapons of mass destruction was not just wrong but also deceitful. To achieve credibility as an act of dissent, *Uncovered* needed somehow to challenge conventional wisdom on its own terms; that is, the documentary could work as dissent only to the extent that it realigned prevailing formations of common sense.

Dissent in this sense operates akin to what Michael Walzer (1987) called "connected criticism" (p. 39), which he defined as emotionally and intellectually engaged social criticism whereby persons succeed or fail to achieve authority and credibility by arguing with fellow citizens, protesting, objecting, and remonstrating angrily and insistently, sometimes even at personal risk. These connected critics appeal to so-called localized principles. Their new or different arguments are built from within, and with intimate knowledge of, a political culture.

Thus, *Uncovered* initiated its critique of the Bush administration by assembling its own cast of insiders, introduced as "The Experts," whose credentials leveraged their repudiation of governing authority on the issue of Iraq's alleged threat to American security. Administration political figures and this cast of dissenting experts on military intelligence, arms control, diplomacy, warfare, and defense policy were juxtaposed visually and verbally on matters related to Iraq and weapons of mass destruction. Sharp criticism of government claims was embedded in calm and cogent narratives of fact and perspective contrasted with clips of administration spokespersons in increasingly compromised positions. Images of truth, reason, balance, judgment, openness, and democracy were rearticulated to the ends of critique and dissociated from the prevailing political position by accounts of the administration's dishonesty, distortions, manipulations, propaganda, theatrical performances, obsessions, dirty tricks, and illegalities.

Here the double gesture of dissent is revealed at a glance as a kind of nonconforming solidarity within the *sensus communis*—a sharp rhetorical thrust against governing opinion and policy balanced by an equally firm foot-

ing in the underlying culture of values, beliefs, and accepted ways of acting. The credibility of dissent, as an act of connected criticism, resides in just such an achievement, which is its challenge and democracy's continuous struggle. Dissent, I want to suggest, is a trick of rhetorical critique, its credibility residing in a double gesture that is democracy's *modus operandi*. The significance of reorienting dissent to democracy in this way becomes increasingly apparent by, first, considering the politics of struggle, then examining the rhetorical heuristics of dissent within its cultural field, and finally illustrating the tactics of dissent by returning to *Uncovered*. The first of these three steps takes us to the intersection of democracy and war.

Dissent as a Form of Struggle

Democracy's formidable challenge may be most clearly indicated on the occasion of war. War, in its purest form, signals the presence of an enemy to coerce, combat, and destroy, not an adversary with whom to contend, negotiate, and coexist politically. Democracy consists most distinctly of relations of contestation among political adversaries, not hostilities between sheer enemies. War and democracy are therefore divergent and alternative forms of struggle.³ Yet, as forms of struggle, they are also convergent and confounding experiences in the sense that war co-opts and degrades democracy, except when democracy—its culture, practice, and institutions—is strong enough to resist the concocting of relations of utter animosity that incite warfare.

An attitude of war reduces critics to enemies who must be coerced more or less into silence and submission. In war, one is either an ally or an enemy, with little or no room for neutrality or loyal opposition. By contrast, an attitude of democracy encourages dissent as a form of struggle among adversaries who are not sheer enemies. Purporting to defend democracy by silencing dissent undercuts democracy just as privileging democratic dissent and deliberation increases the incentive to address rather than subdue domestic critics and alien Others. In this way, a healthy democratic polity constitutes a constraint on war rather than an incentive or excuse for war, a presumption for inclusive relations of difference and contestation rather than exclusive relations of hostility and domination. War in the name of democracy is a sign of a democracy's weakness rather than its strength and an expression of little faith in its potential to manage the human divide.

At its best, democracy converts hostilities into constructive relations of consubstantial rivalry and political contestation, which makes war more difficult to motivate under less-than-compelling circumstances and more closely scrutinized even when it is perceived as unavoidable or otherwise justified.⁴ Where war reduces the image of a rival to the figure of pure enmity, democracy seeks to articulate more complex characterizations of adversaries that consist of differences intermixed with similarities. Points of identification constructed in democratic discourse serve to bridge divisive distinctions well enough to sus-

tain political relations without effacing the boundaries that mark separate and opposed identities.

Dissent is therefore a mainstay—not a luxury, a nuisance, or a malfunction—of democratic governance. It serves as the medium of productive competition without which there would be no play of differences, no way of holding delimited perspectives sufficiently accountable to one another, and no means of accommodating to a pluralism of opinions, interests, identities, and diverging orientations or of exercising judgment and acting on decisions at a given point in time while remaining responsive to changing circumstances, unresolved disagreements, and continuing uncertainties. The political is the realm of conflict and diversity, what Chantal Mouffe (2000, p. 101) discerned as the antagonism endemic to social relations, and politics is the ongoing effort to achieve an order of coexistence within a context of continuing conflict and contestation. Without dissent, there is no democratic polity of adversaries and thus no politics, only forced unity and unmitigated enmity that is the end of politics, *per se*.

The depoliticized alternatives to dissent are submissive quiescence and violent resistance, neither of which is fitting for democracy understood as collective self-rule. Under an ongoing condition of war and terror, where democratic institutions, culture, and practices are diminished, government stifles dissent in the name of protecting democracy from itself and its enemies. Dissenters are marked with the sign of the domestic enemy and accused of weakening the nation from within, of making the homeland vulnerable to foreign enemies. Branded as a disuniting force and as traitors to a just cause, they are regarded with hostility rather than acknowledged as a loyal opposition of legitimate adversaries or recognized as a constructive influence, a safeguard against simplistic thinking and destructive, even self-defeating, exploits, and an abiding source of democratic strength.⁵

Indeed, dissent is a practical, if underappreciated, necessity in a complex and volatile world. It is anything but an inconvenience to democratic governance or a detriment to managing the human divide but instead an optimal medium of collective self-rule—a declination from tyranny and terror, coercion and violence. Dissent is normal to strong democratic practice and a sign of real political health, not of dysfunction or failure. Its *modus operandi* in a robust and open political system is vigorous debate and engaged deliberation. It is a rowdy affair (Ivie, 2002, pp. 277-285).

When debate inside and outside of formal channels of deliberation is insufficiently engaged, dissent defaults to myriad forms of protest that interlace poetic complaints with provocative speech and that resort to symbolic acts of resistance and even violence. The likelihood of political struggle escalating beyond dissent into acts of violence and armed rebellion increases to the extent that authorities dismiss protest as merely the venting of public steam or suppress it in the name of order and safety. Democracy, that is, requires due regard for rhetorical struggle on issues of consequence and about differences of magnitude if politics is to prevail over alienation.

Whether it takes the form of deliberating or demonstrating, debating or protesting, the rhetoric of dissent channels social struggle into political contestation (contra rebellion or capitulation) not just by representing formations of difference but also by articulating similarities into points of contact or convergence that cross established boundaries. Identification, as Kenneth Burke (1950/1969, p. 22) observed, compensates for division but does not displace it, for division is endemic to human relations. As identification's ironic counterpart, division constitutes the factional basis of the partisan scramble that motivates communication. If political actors, as individuals and groups, were not separate and distinct from one another, there would be no need to articulate common ground or to achieve sufficient cohesion to avoid relations of sheer antagonism. Dissent, like other forms of rhetoric or symbolic action, walks a wavering line between division and identification, inducing cooperation among factions where otherwise victimization occurs all too readily and leads seemingly effortlessly to murder and war. Fashioning political rivals as consubstantial in some manner of speaking makes them joined but separate, identified though distinct, and communicative yet polemical. Consubstantiality is an attitude or way of acting together in our separateness at multiple levels of social organization (Burke, 1950/1969, pp. 21-23, 43-46). Consubstantial rivalry, in this sense, is paradigmatic of democratic dissent and engaged citizenship. It is a trope for enhancing democratic practice under increasingly widespread conditions of difference and division, of communicating across the political divide without effacing rival identities, and of articulating hierarchical relationships that are complex, interdependent, multilateral, delimited, and mutable rather than fixed orders of unilateral domination.⁶

Yet an exigency of war and terror presses hard against polemics of any kind when patriotism is measured by a standard of political conformity instead of democratic contestation. Dissent is most difficult to carry out at the point of greatest tension in human affairs and when it could especially benefit the political process. Periods of war and crisis reveal how deeply democracy is invested in dissent to maintain its own vitality and viability—indeed, its very ethos. Usually, the lesson is learned retrospectively by way of negative examples after dissent has been suppressed and democracy curtailed in the name of national security. A question, therefore, that is of some immediacy and import for enhancing constructive democratic agonistics and, by extension, for reducing enticements to war is how dissent can be sustained against expectations of conformity and the narrowing of political vision. What, in short, are the heuristics of dissent that constitute democratic practice when it is otherwise curtailed and constrained by a regime of crisis and war?

The Rhetorical Heuristics of Dissent

This question of heuristics, I would like to suggest, can be usefully addressed from the perspective of rhetoric. It resonates with Michel de Certeau's interest

in exploring the everyday ways of operating, that is, the tactical procedures and quotidian modes of practice that creatively reappropriate cultural elements of a repressive political formation. A multitude of tactical “procedures and ruses” deployed by people caught in the net of Foucauldian “discipline” enable individuals and groups to “compose the network of an antidiscipline.” De Certeau (1984) observed that “the weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them” (p. xix) by converting everyday practices such as reading and talking into clever tactical maneuvers. Rhetoric, he noted, “offers models for differentiating among the types of tactics” (p. xx), the turns or tropes, figures, arguments, and other tricks of speaking or operating that contribute to “turning the tables on the powerful” (p. xx). Culture develops polemically, de Certeau argued, “in an atmosphere of tensions . . . for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary” (p. xvii) as it “articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force” (p. xvii).

Dissent, by this reckoning, is just such a rhetorical practice or set of ingenious tactical operations for engaging in democratic polemics by continually adjusting to circumstances and extant relationships of force on the margins of power and at the miniscule or microlevel of a cultural field. This is the kind of marginality that de Certeau believed to be more or less universal and no longer restricted to minority groups. It is a problematic that he addressed from the point of view of enunciation, which is a perspective that privileges “the act of speaking” as it “effects an appropriation, or reappropriation, of language by its speakers” to establish “a *present* relative to a time and place” and to posit a “*contract with the other*” in a “network of places and relations” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiii, emphasis in original).

De Certeau frames social action in a manner useful to exploring the possibilities of dissent within the context of a weak democratic culture and an increasingly militarized regime of surveillance and governance that operates under cover of an open-ended war on terrorism, what Henry Giroux, among others, referred to as the return of the garrison or security state in the service of global capitalism.⁷ Thinking of dissent in this way under these conditions makes it an ongoing exercise of rearticulating relationships among components within a cultural field, of rhetorical critique from within an established framework of understanding. It makes the dissenter into a rhetorical trickster, which does not present a particularly pretty or elegant picture that conforms to the tastes of elites but also does not place the dissenter outside the constraints of context. It presumes not only a capacity for what Vico called *ingenium* operating rhetorically on and within a *sensus communis* but also an effort to establish points of what Kenneth Burke (1950/1969, pp. 55-56) called “identification” or “constituentality” to bridge social and other divisions between deeply conflicted parties.⁸ Dissent understood as productive rhetorical critique is addressed to particular audiences.⁹ It acknowledges outcomes to be adaptive and impermanent, even ephemeral, rather than ideal, universal, or lasting—

that is, to be situated and more or less momentary, smaller rather larger in scope, ongoing and neither determined nor especially predictable but always involving considerations of timing and other rhetorical tactics.

This is anything but a heroic model of dissent that postulates some Atlas-like figure overturning a world, or even a regime, of injustice. It comports more closely with Roland Bleiker's conception of how popular dissent operates in an age of global politics, succumbing neither to a sense of "discursive fatalism" in which discourses of knowledge and power constitute subjects and thereby obviate human agency nor to an "overzealous belief in the autonomy of human action," Bleiker (2000, pp. 11, 13) sought to find a middle ground on the "discourse-agency axis." From this vantage point, he considered how existing power relations might be rendered problematic and transformed over time in a boundary-crossing process of disruptive speaking and writing that involves "self-consciously stretching the boundaries of existing linguistic and political conventions" to create possibilities of thinking and acting "in more inclusive ways." In this sense, dissent is tactical in the way de Certeau (1984) used the term, operating inside rather than outside of the opponent's terrain in order to achieve a degree of "aesthetic autonomy" without losing contact with "the language of existing social and political realities." It is a "critique of language" that seeks to reappropriate existing concepts and articulate revised or new concepts by means such as thinking in fragments, noting discontinuities and contradictions, and avoiding monological thinking. For Bleiker, dissent is a form of language practice that functions as action and politics by raising questions and creating doubt and ambivalence to make space for increased tolerance. No regime of power can dominate every aspect of social and political life, just as no form of dissent can operate autonomously beyond the political practices it critiques. Dissent is a collective and continuous process of transformation performed within "an existing web of power and knowledge" (p. 269). Possibilities of change accumulate over extended periods of time and lead to outcomes that cannot be fully anticipated or adequately understood in causal terms (Bleiker, 2000).

Dissent, understood as a process of tactical rhetorical critique, functions to rescue democracy from the narrowing perspective of orthodoxy and corresponding abuses of power. Steven Shiffrin (1990) argued, in this regard, that dissent carries generally progressive implications and that the democratic value of dissent, as part of the "daily dialectic of power relations" (p. 97) in society, is to challenge "conventions, habits, and traditions" (p. 95) and other strong "societal pressures to conform" (p. 95), formations that constitute oppressive hierarchies and "incentives to keep quiet" (p. 95). Without dissent, society is more prone to serve a narrow definition of the common good and to suppress difference in a misguided attempt to resolve conflict, to put an end to the contestability of reigning conventions, and thus to escape from politics. To celebrate dissent in a context of American culture, Shiffrin (1990) turned to the romantic spirit of Emerson, underscoring his emphasis on "activity, dyna-

mism, movement, creativity, originality, imagination, spontaneity, invention, and struggle” along with his passion for the concrete and particular over the universal and abstract.¹⁰

Shiffrin’s appeal to romanticism is compensatory to the otherwise overly strong pull of convention, a balancing move aimed at operating on existing boundaries to make them more flexible and accommodating to difference. Dissent requires a spirit of imagination to criticize existing habits of discourse and to engage relations of power, and society should appreciate the value of such defiance and vision, Shiffrin (1990) argued, to preserve its own vitality and diversity. Indeed, he insisted that Americans do value dissent, at least tacitly, and that everyone is as much a romantic as a rationalist because categories cannot be thought about without reference to particulars and reason cannot function sans emotion. The trick is in achieving “a different vision of first amendment priorities, a better sense of values” (p. 156) that makes the first amendment, democracy, and the romance of dissent interdependent. Valuing dissent is a matter of vision, in Shiffrin’s (pp. 69-71, 156-158) view, not of method.

Opposing vision to method, however, is a delimiting move that leaves the difficult and largely quotidian work of dissent at the mercy of a more-or-less heroic version of romantic inspiration. It does not address the problem of rhetorical invention in the service of political critique under circumstances of strong social and governmental pressures to conform. The heuristics of dissent—the tactics of reenvisioning, reappropriating, and reordering cultural resources—are displaced from consideration by forcing a choice between sheer creativity and mechanistic methodology. If we examine the middle ground between pure inspiration and mere method, though, we can find a readily discernable heuristic that is basic to the production of democratic dissent.

This basic heuristic, as I have discussed elsewhere, resides in the work of various rhetorical and discourse theorists. When we turn to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on democratic theory, Kenneth Burke on rhetoric and symbolic action, and Roland Bleiker on popular dissent, we come on a convergence of approaches for productively critiquing and rearticulating cultural categories. Briefly, in the case of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), this amounts to approaching discourse as an “articulatory practice” with metaphors operating at “nodal points” of signifying chains. Mouffe (1993), then, saw “metaphoric redescription” as the key to rearticulating problematic hegemonic formations. Similarly, Bleiker (2000) saw language critique operating within existing discursive formations by means of redeploing conceptual terms and/or inventing new ones, two dimensions of a basic process that is closely akin to Mouffe’s notion of metaphoric redescription. For Burke (1954/1965), also a master metaphor links a set of contributing and qualifying terms into a complex hierarchy, forming a motivating perspective that can be altered through various tactics of “planned incongruity” and “symbolic bridging and merging.”¹¹

Applying this critical heuristic to resist and transform oppressive cultural formations entails an exacting rhetorical analysis and application of specific terminologies within particular contexts of symbolic action. We can turn, for example, to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969) "new rhetoric" for a systematic catalogue of rhetorical starting points and forms of association and dissociation that build upon, revise, and establish discursive structures of reality. Similarly, we can examine various works by Burke (1973, 1984) that deploy rhetorical categories creatively and insightfully to effect planned incongruities and dislodge troublesome reifications. We can consult any number of insightful studies of the rhetorical practices of specific dissenters, such as Robert Terrill's (2004) exposition of the evolving articulations of radical judgment in the public discourse of Malcolm X. These kinds of critical and theoretical works detail the basic heuristic of dissent, exemplifying tricks and tropes of metaphorical critique that are available to a marginalized demos for resisting and transforming oppressive relations of power. Rhetoric, as Kenneth Burke (1950/1969) explained, is an ongoing project in transformation and thus a source of "*terms for transformation in general*" that "might be localized, or particularized" (p. 11). The productive work of rhetorical critique is preparatory to and an act of political dissent.

Metaphor understood as a basic heuristic for democratic dissent is the master trope for rhetorical critique, a trickster's view of a vast and various trove, or what Burke (1973) called "equipment for living" and defined as schemes for "siz[ing] up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes" (p. 304). This trove of techniques helps political actors to avoid being driven into a corner; it consists of bridging devices to effect symbolic mergers and transcend differences.¹² Metaphor, in short, is a perspective on dissent, a way of accessing rhetorical resources to a certain end, not of reducing them to a single form. Metaphor stands in for rhetoric, frames it, and expresses an attitude toward its constituents and their uses. Thus, a metaphorical perspective entails other master tropes such as irony, metonymy, and synecdoche; figures such as catachresis, paradox, and chiasmus; *topoi* such as definition, partition, comparison, conjunction, genus, species, contraries, contradictions, adjuncts, antecedents, consequents, causes, and effects; modes of proof such as enthymeme, aphorism, analogy, example, emotional appeal, and ethos or character; persuasive techniques of arrangement such as partition and climax; and much more. These are the dissenter's tactical devices for rearticulating and reappropriating prevailing formations and thus for contesting power from the margins where nearly everyone now resides.

Just as metaphor frames rhetoric to provide a rich heuristic for dissent, with dissent understood as the critique of rigidified conventions, oppressive hierarchies, and narrow perspectives, the operation of dissent as a form of democratic political struggle depends on constituting the Other as an adversary rather than an enemy. Negotiating the precarious line between division and identification is the constant but crucial challenge of sustaining a rhetorically viable Other.

As Judith Butler (2004) observed, the tension between identification and disidentification must be carefully balanced, rather than resolved or effaced, to avoid dehumanizing and silencing the Other. Even as identification seeks to overcome difference, Butler noted, it can only fully succeed by collapsing into identity, thereby removing the very condition of its own possibility. A triumph of uniformity “spells the death of identification itself” (p. 146) and, by extension, a total opposition between good and evil that takes the dehumanizing form of us versus them and constructs them as the evil enemy. This “evacuation of the human through the [triumphalist] image” vanquishes difference and with it the incentive for communication, thereby quelling dissent by “threatening the speaking subject with an uninhabitable identification” (p. xix). This is a strategy of quelling dissent, Butler (2004) argued, that

happens not only through a series of shaming tactics which have a certain psychological terrorization as their effect, but they work as well by producing what will and will not count as a viable speaking subject and a reasonable opinion within the public domain. (p. xix)

Insisting on total identification yields a condition of implicit censorship that constitutes a climate of fear and shame, reinforces a regime of explicit censorship, and “empties the public domain of debate and democratic contestation” (p. xx).

Clearly, the rhetorical heuristics of dissent must be considered under such trying conditions for how they can help to resist the effacement of difference and the reduction of dissenters to the status of social outcasts and enemies of the state. The question to ask, then, is how dissenters can be articulated as legitimate adversaries rather than relegated to the “uninhabitable identification” of disloyal outcasts and threatening Others. How can we maintain a sufficient balance between identification and division, similarity and difference, so that democratic rivalry is enabled in an atmosphere of tensions?

This is a version of Burke’s (1950/1969) question about the give and the take, the flare-ups, and the scramble in what he called “the human barnyard” (p. 23). In the realm of “communication and polemic,” he postulated, a rhetoric of identification enunciates relationships across the human divide in which the parties become “both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (p. 21). To identify one with the other is to make them functionally consubstantial but not entirely or essentially identical. Sharing a common language does not eliminate its ambiguities. Thus, identification and division are separated by a constantly “waving line” and made to operate “ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins.” (p. 25). For Burke, then, rhetoric “deals with the possibilities of classification in its *partisan* aspects,” (p. 22, emphasis in original) considering the ways in which individuals “become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another” (p. 22). Maintaining the waver-

ing line rhetorically to constitute a degree of consubstantiality between rivals is Burke's "comic corrective" to the tragic ritual of vilification and victimization (Burke, 1984, pp. 30-44, 166-175).

Accordingly, the problem of constituting the dissenting Other as an adversary to be tolerated and addressed, rather than as the enemy to be silenced and suppressed, can be usefully framed as a question of how to enunciate points of identification that legitimize positions of difference. How can dissenters deploy rhetorical heuristics to articulate relations of consubstantial rivalry? Or, from a metaphorical perspective, what are the rhetorical means of turning cultural categories—of rearticulating and reallocating key terms located at nodal points of discursive formations—into substances shared between factional parties?

The dissenter's salvation resides in the ambiguities of substance. A Burkean understanding of substance features its symbolic function and considers its rhetorical transformation rather than thinking of it as an actual and static essence, as the permanent and pure thing in itself. Thus, from this perspective on the paradox of substance, "to tell what a thing is, you place it in terms of something else." Its "substance" is defined by its placement, that is, by its context or location, by its origins, by its direction and purpose, and/or by what it opposes. These are among Burke's principal topoi for articulating alternative configurations of substance that can enable antagonists to inhabit common ground without sacrificing separate identities (Burke, 1945/1969, pp. 21, 21-41). They are the shifting shapes of the trickster. As such, these topoi or tropes of substance bring into consideration the full range of rhetorical heuristics for building relations of similarity and difference into functional formations of consubstantial rivalry. Without so much bricolage, dissenters are all too easily placed outside the bounds of legitimacy and promptly tainted by the stifling sign of evil. Thus, in serving the aims of collective self-rule, the political terrain must be reconfigured rhetorically to denote so-called substantive points of identification from positions of difference. In this sense, rhetorical critique of the reified substance of political identity is necessary to produce a viable (i.e., legitimized) status for dissent.

The legitimacy of democratic dissent is a double-sided notion of constructive criticism, qualified deference, or conflicted confirmation that defines a loyal opposition. Without the sharp edge of criticism, dissent fails to challenge existing attitudes, conventions, and policies. Without a reassuring embrace, dissent is readily dismissed as alien and ill willed. Thus, the necessity of a faithful or trustworthy embrace to reduce the distance between dissenters and the ruling formations they wish to alter. Yet the gap cannot be fully closed without conforming entirely to the contours of a repressive political regime. The possibility of credible dissent relies on achieving a certain productive tension between affirming and disconcerting the political order. Optimal credibility, by this account, implies a kind of rough equivalency (or synthesis) of the two

gestures—that is, a double gesture of nonconforming solidarity. This compound gesture of consubstantial rivalry is evident, for example, in political documentary criticizing the Bush administration’s preemptive invasion of Iraq.

The Double Gesture of Dissent in *Uncovered*

Completed in November 2003 and released initially in December as a 56-minute DVD, *Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War* reportedly sold nearly 100,000 copies online by the following May. Identified by *The Village Voice* (Kaufman, 2004) as a “documentary of dissent,” it was widely publicized on e-mail by MoveOn.org, which organized nationwide home screenings, and it was watched by opinion leaders and policy makers in Washington, D.C., through the auspices of the Center for American Progress (Greenwald, 2004). The DVD version was expanded into a 90-minute, 35-millimeter film for worldwide distribution by Cinema Libre Distribution and opened August 20, 2004, in theaters in New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C., under the slightly revised title, *Uncovered: The War on Iraq*.

The press release for the film version states that Greenwald’s documentary “deconstructs the administration’s case for war through interviews with U.S. intelligence and defense officials, foreign service experts, and U.N. weapons inspectors—including a former CIA director, a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia and even President Bush’s Secretary of the Army” (Cinema Libre Studio, 1984). The documentary’s basic formula for persuasion, as this release suggests, is to combine an edgy act of deconstruction with a heavy cast of authoritative insiders. Not surprisingly, then, it is commonly described by reviewers as a damning and devastating critique that is honest and as sober as a legal brief, and that eschews the flamboyancy of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, adopting instead a straightforward and intellectual approach (Oppenheimer, 2004).¹³

The documentary’s credibility as an exercise in dissent, in this particular case, rests on its devastating criticism of the war and its studious conformity to the broader cultural values of reason and rationality. It makes itself consubstantial with the larger political culture in the very manner it rivals the Bush administration, studiously adopting a persona of reasonableness to convey a contrasting image of executive manipulation and misrepresentation. A principal synthesizing vehicle of this tactic for turning the tables on the administration is an array of recurring visual and verbal metaphors of political theater and obsessive propaganda. Director Greenwald’s stinging criticism, though, is delivered by his large cast of expert characters with a demeanor that is always calm, never agitated.

The number and credentials of Greenwald’s cast are featured throughout the documentary, which devotes a long opening segment to introducing “The Experts”:

MILT BEARDEN, 30 years with the CIA from 1964 to 1994; RAND BEERS, I worked for the government for 35 years starting with the Marine Corps from 1962 to 1968 with some service in Vietnam; GRAHAM FULLER, I was 25 years as a professional intelligence officer with CIA; KAREN KWIATKOWSKI, Almost 5 years in the Pentagon and the last almost 3 of that working in the office of the secretary of defense; JOHN BRADY KIESLING, I spent almost 20 years with the state department. Three years in Athens as a political counselor for the chief of the political section; PATRICK LANG, I'm a retired colonel in the United States army, military intelligence special forces; LARRY JOHNSON, I was previously with the state department's office of counter-terrorism from 1989-1993. Prior to that I worked with the Central Intelligence Agency. . . . RAY MCGOVERN, For 27 years I was an analyst first of Soviet affairs and then of wider responsibilities; JOSEPH WILSON, I served for 23 years in the American Foreign Service as a diplomat. . . . SCOTT RITTER, I'm a former weapons inspector with the United Nations in Iraq. I served in that capacity from 1991 until 1998. . . . ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER, I never expected that I'd leave the navy and become chiefspeak of our country, director of Central Intelligence, but that happened. (*Uncovered*, 2004, pp. 1-3).

Each time these and the other experts appear throughout the documentary, their credentials are displayed next to them on screen.

The veracity of this expert testimony is encoded in numerous subtleties of speech and manner, such as Milt Bearden's masterful use of understatement.¹⁴ These subtleties are reinforced by overt claims to special knowledge, such as Scott Ritter contradicting Secretary of State Powell and other administration figures by saying, "There were never any chemical weapons in that facility. I'm intimately familiar with that facility. I've inspected it a number of times. Other inspectors have inspected it many more times than I have" (*Uncovered*, 2004, p. 22). Ray McGovern, commenting similarly from his experienced vantage point on "Colin Powell's [U.N.] debut as an imagery analyst," finds it to be "highly embarrassing for those of us who know something about the business" (p. 22). Joe Wilson tells of being sent by the CIA to check out, at the request of Vice President Cheney, a report of Niger's government authorizing the sale of uranium yellowcake to Iraq, which he reported "could not have happened" (p. 18), yet the administration insisted after that on citing the bogus report as evidence of Iraq's development of weapons of mass destruction (p. 19). When a clip is next played of Condoleezza Rice denying that the administration knew the Niger report was bogus, Ambassador Wilson trumps her denial with his own unique authority as the administration's source of corrected intelligence: "Given what I knew about where the question had originated and given what I knew about the way the government works, I knew that people in her circle did know" (p. 19).

Against this uniform display of expert knowledge and informed rationality, Greenwald shows a presidency determined to distort reality to its own ideological ends. He has U.N. Arms Inspector Scott Ritter verbally frame the visual image of Secretary of State Colin Powell at the United Nations by saying in a voiceover, "First of all it should be noted that Colin Powell's speech to the

United Nations was theater, a masterful theater, effective theater at the time” (*Uncovered*, 2004, p. 21). A few shots later, intelligence expert Ray McGovern characterizes Secretary Powell’s U.N. speech, specifically the faulty evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, as “a masterful performance, but none of it was true” (p. 24). CIA Director George Tenet, McGovern had previously observed, was placed directly behind Powell “as a prop . . . as if to say that the Central Intelligence Agency stands behind, or in this case sits behind, everything that Colin Powell says” (p. 21). Even the images of mobile labs Powell used to visualize his case for Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction, Ritter pointed out, are not photographs but instead “artist’s renditions” (p. 23) because “we have no proof they exist” (p. 39). In another expert voiceover toward the end of the documentary, as President Bush is shown emerging from a fighter aircraft outfitted in flight suit after staging an aircraft carrier landing to declare the end of major fighting in Iraq, viewers are told that “you don’t want your president to be seen as a hot dog . . . I mean you want a sign of kind of maturity and not testosterone blasting through” (p. 39).

Besides relegating the administration’s case for war to theatrical display, Greenwald has his experts frame it variously as propaganda (David Albright, scientist and weapons inspector: “It borders on propaganda to argue that the small number [of chemical weapons] that have been found by inspectors imply that, in this case, over 29,000 exist” (*Uncovered*, 2004, p. 16); as rhetoric (Ritter: the media “bought into the Bush Administration’s rhetoric” [p. 25]); as manipulating intelligence (Sen. Ted Kennedy: “what has happened was more than a failure of intelligence, but a manipulation of the intelligence . . . to justify the decision to go to war” [p. 35]); as the one-sided case making of an unchecked prosecuting attorney (Albright voiceover: “It was a prosecutor making a case, using what benefited his case, ignoring evidence that would undermine his case, and there was no defense attorney to give us the other side” [p. 9]); as obsessive, ideological, secretive, misleading, immoral, and even criminal (John Dean, who served in the Nixon “dirty tricks” White House: “The most troubling thing about the . . . distortions and the misleading statements that Bush gave Congress is that it is a federal felony, it’s a crime to mislead and distort information to present to the Congress” (p. 17).

As Greenwald’s experts refute the administration’s case point by point, clips are repeatedly shown of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Rice, Fleischer, and Wolfowitz reasserting their now-deconstructed case for war until finally they begin to stumble, bluster, and backpeddle when no weapons of mass destruction could be found in occupied Iraq. In one instance, at the end of a series of clips conveying the image of a progressively unraveling secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld is seen saying that he could not think of anyone who “contended that the Iraqis had nuclear weapons” (*Uncovered*, 2004, p. 29). The veracity of expert dissenters stands in bold relief to the administration’s theatrics as the documentary closes on the theme of upholding the Constitution, questioning authority, and recognizing the patriotism of dissent.

By these kinds of rhetorical operations, *Uncovered* reappropriates cultural capital to challenge a privileged narrative of war. It articulates the legitimacy of its own dissenting voice as a democratic rival to a ruling executive by displaying deference to the public values of transparency, honesty, and reasonableness that the Bush administration is accused of abandoning in favor of political theater. Metaphors of theatrical production help to synthesize the image of a ruling regime placed at odds with the substance of a democratic polity and contrasted directly with the democratic persona of a cast of highly credentialed war dissenters. The point here is not to suggest that these are the only tricks or tactics used in *Uncovered* to turn the tables on a war president and his cabinet (or to suggest that *Uncovered* is superior to other documentaries of dissent such as Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*), but instead to illustrate how the status of consubstantial rivalry can be constructed of a rhetorical bricolage and in the double gesture of nonconforming solidarity. Achieving a rough equivalency between affirming and disrupting the political order leverages dissent in circumstances that otherwise demand assent or compliance against one's better judgment. The tactics for transforming and reallocating political capital will vary from one dissenting rhetor, genre, and situation to another; however, in general they will operate in the manner of a productive rhetorical critique to the extent that such a critique serves the ends of enriching an anemic democratic culture by challenging reified discourses of good and evil and the violence rigidity engenders. Dissent understood in this way returns human struggle to the realm of politics, renders politics less heroic, and opens democracy to everyday rhetorical practices.

Notes

1. I refer here to Senator Robert Byrd, whose speeches are now available in book form (Byrd, 2004).

2. As Robert McChesney (2004) observed, "When criticism gains prominence in the news media regarding a U.S. war, the change in coverage almost always reflects a split among the elite, as was the case with Vietnam and, more recently, Iraq during the occupation" (p. 74).

3. War and dissent are being contrasted here in their purest forms, one an act of coercion, the other an act of persuasion, that is, opposite modalities of struggle. This does not mean that there are not elements of each represented in any given context of action. War, for instance, may engage the enemy in acts of negotiation to achieve some degree of conditional surrender; however, it operates primarily under the sign of coercion. Likewise, dissent in the extreme may turn to acts of rebellion, thus merging into warfare. Democratic dissent, however, operates most distinctly within the realm of political contestation. To say that war is an extension of politics is to reduce politics, in that case, to coercion. To say that dissent is political contestation or rivalry entails notions of polemical and adversarial relations but does not extend to sheer antagonism

or even mean that strong differences are necessarily (or even primarily) expressed in overt forms of opposition. My argument instead is that the credibility of dissent requires the articulation of a degree of consubstantiality, stylistically and substantively, roughly equivalent with the extent of divergence from a reigning viewpoint. Cooperative practices are compensatory to competitive differences, enabling political judgments to be made and action taken without closing off the possibility of reconsidering those judgments. Closure is achieved enough to act but not so completely to obviate continuing the democratic process of contestation.

4. By focusing on democracy from the perspective of dissent, I am emphasizing the need for articulating points of identification from positions of difference to respect and preserve pluralism rather than working toward consensus under a rather-restricted notion of shared goals and outcomes. This does not rule out the aim of achieving a working degree of coordination but instead shifts the basis on which the type and amount of identification are accessed. Competition and rivalry remain central to political coordination but not in the sense of a zero-sum game where any victory by one party is a loss by the other. Political hierarchies, or hegemonies, are much more complex, asymmetrical, and malleable than that.

5. Cass R. Sunstein (2003) advanced the argument that societies prosper when they promote dissent because it provides a corrective to group polarization, a check on conformity, and ultimately better decisions even in times of war.

6. I introduce this notion of consubstantial rivalry in Ivie (2005).

7. See, for example, Giroux (2003, pp. 46-70). For a discussion of the tradition of weak or thin democracy that has defined the American republic, see Barber (1984), pp. 3-25. Hanson (1985) also examined the rhetorical tradition of liberal democracy to reveal how weakly inflected toward democracy it has been from the beginning. As Dahl (2001, pp. 24-25) puts the matter succinctly, "A substantial number of the Framers believed that they must erect constitutional barriers to popular rule because the people would prove to be an unruly mob, a standing danger to law, to orderly government, and to property rights" (pp. 24-25).

8. On Vico, see for instance Schaeffer (1990). Burke (1950/1969) developed his point about the rhetoric of identification in *A Rhetoric of Motives*.

9. My sense of productive rhetorical critique, grounded in a Burkean notion of the comic corrective, is explained in Ivie (2001).

10. In a following work, Shiffrin (1999, pp. xi, 10-11) defined dissent as "speech that criticizes existing customs, habits, traditions, institutions, or authorities" (p. xi).

11. These points are explained in Ivie (2004), pp. 29-30.

12. Burke (1984) discussed these and other purposes in his "Dictionary of Pivotal Terms" in *Attitudes toward history* (pp. 216-338).

13. Another reviewer, Ann Hornaday (2004), referred to the film version of *Uncovered* as "prose, not poetry" that is "quick, efficient polemic, the cinematic equivalent of a good op-ed piece" featuring "impeccably credentialed witnesses to debunk the case made for going to war" (p. C7) It presents a "convincing and well-organized . . . case . . . systematically breaking down the administration's arguments regarding WMC and terrorism, as well as the use of dubious informants, manipulated intelligence,

intimidation and a supine media and Congress” (p. C7). The film’s experts “provide quietly persuasive arguments” that “quietly deconstruct” the administration’s “political theater” (p. C7). In short, “it’s smart, engaging discourse.”

14. “Preemptive war by its very nature is something that is entirely new to the United States of America and to what we call the Western Alliance. You go back through history and at the Peace of Westfalia in 1648 a group of nations that had just killed most of each other off decided that isn’t quite the way to do it and they came up with a set of laws that we’ve all lived by fairly well since then which doesn’t much allow for preemptive war” (*Uncovered*, 2004, p. 7).

References

- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bleiker, R. (2000). *Popular dissent, human agency and global politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Burke, K. (1965). *Permanence and change: An anatomy of purpose*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill. (Original work published 1954)
- Burke, K. (1969). *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1945)
- Burke, K. (1969). *A rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1950)
- Burke, K. (1973). *The philosophy of literary form: Studies in symbolic action* (3rd ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1984). *Attitudes toward history* (3rd ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.
- Byrd, R. (2004). *Losing America: Confronting a reckless and arrogant presidency*. New York: Norton.
- Cinema Libre Studio. (2004). *About the film* [Press Release]. Retrieved August 31, 2004, from www.truthuncovered.com/
- Dahl, R. (2001). *How democratic is the American constitution?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Giroux, H. (2003). *The abandoned generation: Democracy beyond the culture of fear*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Greenwald, R. (2004, July). *The director’s introduction*. Retrieved August 31, 2004, from www.truthuncovered.com/
- Hanson, R. (1985). *The democratic imagination in America: Conversations with our past*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hornaday, A. (2004, October 1). “Uncovered” makes strong case against Iraq invasion. *Washington Post*, reprinted in *Herald-Times* (Bloomington, IN), p. C7.

- Ivie, R. (2001). Productive criticism then and now. *American Communication Journal*, 4. Available at www.acjournal.org/
- Ivie, R. (2002). Rhetorical deliberation and democratic politics in the here and now. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 5, 277-285.
- Ivie, R. (2004). Prologue to democratic dissent in America. *Javnost/The Public*, 11, 19-35.
- Ivie, R. (2005). *Democracy and America's war on terror*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Kaufman, A. (2004, 11 May). Docs populi: Raging against the Republican machine. *Village Voice*. Retrieved August 31, 2004, from www.truthuncovered.com/villagevoice.html
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (2001). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics* (2nd ed.). London: Verso.
- McChesney, R. (2004). *The problem of the media: U.S. communication politics in the 21st century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Mouffe, C. (1993). *The return of the political*. London: Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox*. London: Verso.
- Oppenheimer, J. (2004, May 20). Uncovered: The war on Iraq. *Screen Daily.com*, 20. Retrieved August 31, 2004, from www.truthuncovered.com/press_reviewsSDN.html
- Perelman, C., & Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1969). *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation* (J. Wilkinson & P. Weaver, Trans.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Schaeffer, J. (1990). *Sensus communis: Vico, rhetoric, and the limits of relativism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shiffrin, S. (1990). *The First Amendment, democracy, and romance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shiffrin, S. (1999). *Dissent, injustice, and the meanings of America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sunstein, C. (2003). *Why societies need dissent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Terrill, R. (2004). *Malcolm X: Invention radical judgment*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Uncovered: The war on Iraq* [Transcript]. (2004). Retrieved August 31, 2004, from www.truthuncovered.com/images/UNCOVEREDtranscript.pdf, 1-3.
- Walzer, M. (1987). *Interpretation and social criticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Robert L. Ivie is a professor of rhetoric and public culture in the Department of Communication and Culture and a member of the faculties in American Studies, Cultural Studies, and Myth Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. He serves as founding editor of *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* and is author, most recently, of *Democracy and America's War on Terror* (2005). Additional information about his research and teaching is available at www.indiana.edu/~ivieweb.