Democratic Dissent and the Trick of Rhetorical Critique
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Over the course of the 2003-04 academic year, select faculty from IU Bloomington met ten times to read and discuss materials on "Democracy and Dissent," drawing on classical and contemporary political theory, Supreme Court cases, and examples from American history. Thus began a new initiative at the Poynter Center, the annual interdisciplinary Seminar and Fellowship.

The essay that follows my introductory remarks grew out of the seminar's year-long interaction, and my purpose here is to briefly summarize the group's work on this topic.

One aim of the Interdisciplinary Seminar and Fellowship is to focus on a theme that has topical and philosophical aspects, and "Democracy and Dissent" fit that bill. The topical aspect grew from the fact that dissent has enjoyed little intellectual and cultural capital in our post-9/11 world. In the current political climate, dominated by pugilistic print and media celebrities, dissenting speech has been trivialized as "uncivil" or, worse, "unpatriotic." Yet that judgment seems unfair. While some dissenting activity can be ill-considered, that fact is no less true of activity that uncritically endorses political policies or candidates. Carving out a space in which dissent can be understood as a vital component of a healthy democracy was one of the seminar's principal aims.

The philosophical work in the Interdisciplinary Seminar and Fellowship was driven by the need to overcome a serious lacuna in scholarly literature. Little theoretical work has been devoted to the idea of dissent. Surveying major works in contemporary political philosophy and democratic theory, one is hard pressed to find extensive discussions of dissent. That fact is striking given the legal and other protections that surround dissenting activity, along with
the fact that dissent has played an important role in the development and reform of democratic institutions. That such an important feature of our political life has received so little attention was worrisome, and perhaps explains why few resources exist to address those who dismiss dissenting activity when it clashes against the views of those in power.

One premise that informed our topical and philosophical inquiry was that dissent is a core feature of democratic citizenship. In that respect we viewed dissent not chiefly as the work of marginalized or alienated citizens, as dissent’s detractors suggest, but as a key ingredient of responsible politics. Essential to understanding dissent is the idea that political authority in democracies relies on the consent of the people—that democracy, strictly speaking, means “rule of the people.” As we know when we hear about elections that offer only one candidate, consent without options is meaningless.

That we lack resources for thinking clearly about dissent is made worse by the fact that dissenting practices are widespread in American public life. At the highest levels of the American judiciary, dissenting opinions are a mainstay of legal reasoning. Debate is the legislative branch presupposes the value of disagreement in the formation of legitimate and sound public policy. The very idea of “checks and balances” in the three main branches of American politics presupposes the need to respect different institutional mandates and the interests of various constituencies. In public life more generally, allowing those with a minority opinion in committees, public hearings, or fact gathering sessions to record their views is often an expression of recognition and respect. Large institutions in the private and public sector have undergone notable reforms in the wake of whistleblowing. Democratic practice walks gingerly along a path that seeks consensus that avoids the perils of group-think. Without institutions that protect dissent and social criticism, that path would be inaccessible.

**Dimensions of Dissent**

Interdisciplinary inquiry into democratic dissent reveals several dimensions. Briefly stated, there are epistemological, political, social, moral, and rhetorical.

At the epistemological level, dissent can improve quality of reasoning-giving in democratic deliberations. Dissenters require their interlocutors to clarify their reasons, defend their assumptions, and respond to challenges. Not infrequently, their questions open up new information and generate points of view that broaden the imagination’s horizons. Reason-giving is improved when those who present their arguments are held to account. Dissenters can improve rationality by insisting on accountability.

Second is a political aspect, the fact that dissent is essential to democratic legitimacy – the need of democratic institutions to enjoy the consent of the governed. Policies and practices would lack legitimacy if the opportunity to contribute to their formation is restricted. Acknowledging the value of dissent makes political processes more inclusive. Dissent can rectify power imbalances, thereby ensuring that deliberative processes are informed by a greater number of those who would be affected by policies or practices on the public docket.

A third aspect of dissent is its social dimension, focusing on the relationship of dissenters to the political majority or, more interestingly, to a tradition of political commitments. Dissenters may wish to stand apart from the political majority for the sake of defending more general traditional values. Others may dissent as a means to an end itself, to challenge authority. On this score, it may be
useful to distinguish between instrumental and categorical dissent. One set of dissenters spots hypocrisy and expresses dissent as a means for honoring traditional virtues. The latter expresses dissent as an end in itself, either to express its ongoing dispute with political authority or to function, self-reflexively, as a prophetic reminder of dissent’s historic importance in democratic reform.

Dissent also has moral aspects as far as it involves responsibilities that attach to rights. The core question here concerns the obligations that accompany the expression of dissent, especially the obligation to respect persons and the duty of fair play or reciprocity that follows from such respect. Dissenters must address the questions of modes of dissent, the possibility of uncivil dissent, as well as the problem of avoiding co-optation in the policies or practices to which they object.

Finally, dissent has rhetorical aspects. Dissent is not always, or often, a discursive practice. It can also be symbolically expressed. Discursive dissent typically provides reasons for disagreement; symbolic dissent aims to broaden imaginative horizons, to re-frame the way a problem is seen, and to propose alternative patterns of reflection.

1 See, e.g., Ann Coulter, Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism (New York: Crown Forum, 2003).

2 Iris Marion Young, Inclusion and Democracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).


Abstract: As an exercise in consisthont rivalry (Kenneth Burke),
democratic dissent operates tactically to
turn the tables on the powerful in a given
cultural field of political tension (Michel de Certeau). It 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.

After 9/11, 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.3

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.4 Meanwhile, grassroots dissent
operated more or less invisibly within a
largely depoliticized consumer society.
relegated to alternative media and epiphec
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 legitimate 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 Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq. *Uncovered* 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 realized prevailing formations of common sense.

Dissent in this sense operates akin to what Michael Walzer calls “connected criticism,” which he defines 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 “localized principles.” Their new or different arguments are built from within, and with intimate knowledge of, a political culture. *Uncovered* initiated its critique of the Bush administration by assembling its own cast of insiders, introduced as “The Experts,” whose credentials leveraged their reputation 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 *sonus communis*—a sharp rhetorical thrust against governing opinion and policy balanced by an equally firm footing 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 entity 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. 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 co-opting 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. Pursuing 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. Where war reduces the image of a rival to the figure of pure enmity, democracy seeks to articulate politically complex characterizations of adversaries that consist of differences intertwined with similarities. Points of identification constructed in democratic discourse serve to bridge divisive distinctions well enough to sustain 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, and no way of holding delimited perspectives sufficiently accountable to one another. There would be no means of accommodating 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 discerns 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 dissenting 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.  

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.  

When debate inside and outside of formal channels of deliberation is insufficiently engaged, dissent defaults to myriad forms of protest that interface 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 contention (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 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. Fashions 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.  

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. 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 in order 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 comprise 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 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 re-appropriate cultural elements of a repressive political formation. Various tactical “procedures and rules” deployed by people caught in the net of Foucauldian “discipline” enable individuals and groups to “compose the network of an antidiscipline.” De Certeau observes that “the weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them” by converting everyday practices such as reading and talking into clever tactical maneuvers. Rhetoric, he notes, “offers models for differentiating among the types of tactics,” that contribute to “turning the tables on the powerful.” Culture develops polemically, de Certeau argues, “in an atmosphere of tensions . . . for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary” as it “articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force.”

Dissent, by this reckoning, is just such a rhetorical practice 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 micro-level of a cultural field. This is the kind of marginality that de Certeau believes to be more or less universal and no longer restricted to minority groups. It is a problem that he addresses 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 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 refers to as the return of the garrison or security state in the service of global capitalism. 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 rhythmically on and within a sensus communis but also an effort to establish points of what Kenneth Burke called “identification” or “consubstantiality” to bridge social and other divisions between deeply conflicted parties.14

Dissent understood as productive rhetorical critique is addressed to particular audiences.15 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 than 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 seeks to find a middle ground on the “discourse-agency axis.” From this vantage point, he considers 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” in order to create possibilities of thinking and acting “in more inclusive ways.”

In this sense, dissent is tactical in the way de Certeau uses 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 re-appropriate 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 in order 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.” Possibilities of change accumulate over extended periods of time and lead to outcomes that cannot be fully anticipated or adequately understood in causal terms.16

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 argues, 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” in society, is to challenge “conventions, habits, and traditions” and other strong “societal pressures to conform,” formations that constitute oppressive hierarchies and “incentives to keep quiet.”

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 turns to the romantic spirit of Emerson, underscoring his emphasis on "activity, dynamism, movement, creativity, originality, imagination, spontaneity, invention, and struggle" along with his passion for the concrete and particular over the universal and abstract.15

Shiffrin’s appeal to romanticism is compensatory to the otherwise overly strong pull of convention, a balancing move aimed at operating on existing boundaries in order 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 argues, in order to preserve its own vitality and diversity. Indeed, he insists 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" that makes the first amendment, democracy, and the romance of dissent interdependent. Valuing dissent is a matter of vision, in Shiffrin’s view, not of method.16

Opposing vision to method, however, is a delimiting move that leaves the difficult 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 re-envisioning, re-appropriating, 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 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 upon a convergence of approaches for productively critiquing and rearticulating cultural categories. In the case of Laclau and Mouffe, this amounts to approaching discourse as an "articulatory practice" with metaphors operating at "nodal points" of signifying chains. Mouffe, then, sees "metaphoric redescription" as the key to rearticulating problematic hegemonic formations. Similarly, Bleiker sees language critique operating within existing discursive formations by means of redeploying conceptual terms and/or inventing new ones, two dimensions of a basic process that is closely akin to Mouffe’s notion of metaphorical redescription. For Burke 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."17

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 Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s "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 Kenneth Burke 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 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 explains, is an ongoing project in transformation and thus a source of “terms for transformation in general” that “might be localized, or particularized.” The productive work of rhetorical critique is both 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 called “equipment for living” and defined as schemes for “sit[ting] up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes.” This trope of techniques helps political actors avoid being driven into a corner; it consists of bridging devices to effect symbolic mergers and transcend differences. 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 towards 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 chiasms; 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 re-appropriating prevailing formations and thus for contesting power from the margins where nearly everyone now resides.

Metaphors frames rhetoric to provide a rich heuristic for dissent, with dissent understood as the critique of rigidified conventions, oppressive hierarchies, and narrow perspectives. Likewise, the operation of dissent as a form of democratic political struggle depends upon 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 observes, the tension between identification and dis-identification must be carefully balanced, rather than resolved or effaced, in order to avoid dehumanizing and silencing the Other. Even as identification seeks to overcome difference, Butler notes, 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” 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 [triumpalist] image” vanquishes difference and with it the incentive for communication, thereby quelling dissent by “threatening the
speaking subject with an uninhabitable identification."

This is a strategy of quelling dissent, Butler argues, 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." 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."26

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 question about the give and the take, the flare-ups, and the scramble in what he called "the human barnyard." 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." 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. Taus, identification and division are separated by a constantly "wavering line" and made to operate "ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins." For Burke, then, rhetoric "deals with the possibilities of classification in its partisan aspects," considering the ways in which individuals "become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another."27 Maintaining the wavering line rhetorically to constitute a degree of consubstantiability between rivals is Burke's "comic corrective" to the tragic ritual of vilification and victimization.28

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 realocating 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 topos for articulating alternative
configurations of substance that can enable antagonists to inhabit common ground without sacrificing separate identities. They are the shifting shapes of the trickster. As such, these topos 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 bricole, 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 “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., legitimated) 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. 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 proactive tension between affirming and disconcerting the political order. Optimal credibility, by this account, implies a kind of rough equivalence (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 50-minute DVD, Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War reportedly sold nearly 100,000 copies on line by the following May. Identified by The Village Voice 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. The DVD version was expanded into a 90-minute, 35-millimeter film for worldwide distribution by Cinema Libre Distribution, opening on 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 Grenwald’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.” 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.

The documentary’s credibility as an exercise in dissent, in this particular case, rests on both its devastating criticism of the war and its studious conformity to the broader cultural values of reason and
rationality. It makes itself substantial 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 taming the tables on the administration is an array of recurring visual and verbal metaphors of political theater and obsessive propaganda. Director Greenland'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 Greenland's cast are featured throughout the documentary, which devotes a long opening segment to introducing "The Experts." The twenty-six experts include:

- MILT BEARDEN, Thirty years with the CIA from 1964 to 1994;
- PAND BEERS, worked for the government for 35 years starting with the Marine Corps from 1962 to 1968 with some service in Vietnam;
- GRAHAM FULLER, 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, almost 20 years with the state department. Three years in Athens as a political counselor for the chief of the political section;
- PATRICK LANG, retired colonel in the United States army, military intelligence special forces;
- LARRY JOHNSON, previously with the state department's office of counter-terrorism from 1989-

1993. Also worked with the Central Intelligence Agency;
- RAY McGOVERN, for 27 years was an analyst first of Soviet affairs and then of wider responsibilities;
- JOSEPH WILSON, 23 years in the American Foreign Service as a diplomat;
- SCOTT RITTER, former weapons inspector with the United Nations in Iraq. Served in that capacity from 1991 until 1998;
- ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER, left the Navy and became director of Central Intelligence."

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. 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." 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." 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," yet the administration insisted after that on citing the bogus report as evidence of Iraq's
development of weapons of mass destruction.” 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.”

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 voice over, “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.” 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.” 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.” Even the images of mobile labs Powell used to visualize his case for Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction, Ritter points out, are not photographs but instead “artist’s renditions” because “we have no proof they exist.” In another expert voice over 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.”

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 borrows 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.”);
- as rhetoric (Ritter: the media “bought into the Bush Administration’s rhetoric”);
- as manipulating intelligence (Senator 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.”);
- as the one-sided case-making of an unchecked prosecuting attorney (Albright voice over: “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.”);
- 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.”)

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 back peddle 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.” 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 re-appropriates 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 unsubstantial rivalry can be constructed of a rhetorical bricoleage and in the double gesture of nonconfronting 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 rhetoric, genre, and situation to another, but 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 atomistic democratic culture by challenging reified discourses of good and evil and the violence rigidity ergenders. 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
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2 As Robert McChesney observes, “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.” Robert W. McChesney, The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication
By focusing on democracy from the perspective of dissent, I am emphasizing the need for articulating points of identification from positions of difference in order 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 ascribed. 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.


Cass R. Sunstein, *Why Societies Need Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003) advances 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.


I introduce this notion of consubstantial rivalry in Robert L. Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).


19 These points are explained in Robert L. Ivie, “Prologue to Democratic Dissent in America,” Javnost/The Public! (June 2004): 19-35.


witnesses to debunk the case made for going to war.” It presents a “convincing and well-organized . . . case . . . systematically breaking down the administration’s arguments regarding WMD and terrorism, as well as the use of dubious informants, manipulated intelligence, intimidation and a supine media and Congress.” The film’s experts “provide quiet persuasive arguments” that “quietly deconstruct” the administration’s “political theater.” In short, “its smart, engaging discourse.” See Ann Hornaday, “‘Uncovered’ Makes Strong Case Against Iraq Invasion,” Washington Post, reprinted in The Herald-Times (Bloomington, Indiana), 1 October 2004, C7.


“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.” Ibid., 7.

Ibid., 22, 18, 19.

Ibid., 21, 26, 21, 23, 39.

Ibid., 16, 25, 35, 9, 36, 12, 17.

Ibid., 29.