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Poroi
An Interdisciplinary Journal of Rhetorical Analysis and Invention
ISSN 2151-2957

Volume 9
Issue 2 (2013)
The Rhetorics of Agitation and Control Then and Now: Studies in Memory of Donovan J. Ochs

DOI: 10.13008/2151-2957.1173
Article 2

Revisiting the Collaboration

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Recommended Citation
Waite Bowers, John. "Revisiting the Collaboration." *Poroi* 9, Iss. 2 (2013): Article 2.
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1173

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Revisiting the Collaboration

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Poroi 9,2 (August 2013)

I'll organize the things I want to say more or less according to the pentad, though I might wander in and out of categories in no strict order. I hope that the result will be pentadic rather than its dreaded pedantic anagram. The dramatistic pentad was the invention of Kenneth Burke (1969) and consists of the following elements: scene, agent, agency, act, and purpose. These, he suggested, provide a complete linguistic description of an event. The event in question in this essay is the book that Donovan Ochs and I wrote in the midst of the late '60s and early '70s social-political agitations.

Scene

We wrote the book in the time of teach-ins, love-ins, be-ins, and Gentle Thursdays. University campuses were scenes of protest, led by Berkeley and Michigan, as Viet Nam generated a sense of injustice and, for young men eligible for the draft and for those who loved them, life-threatening circumstances. Various campus organizations specialized in giving advice about avoiding the draft.

For many students, the situation was simple if not simplistic. Their imperial government was violating the will of the people. Viet Nam generated a distrust of power that generalized to a suspicion of administrators in all institutions, including universities. The civil rights movement took new energy from this general unrest, and soon it would expand into an active women's movement. In universities, archaic regulations limiting the behavior of women but not of men provided an easy target.

For the students' parents and for other folks at home, the situation was incomprehensible and chaotic. Mostly, they saw the students as pampered infants demanding immediate gratification.

In the department, both Donovan Ochs and I were members of the Rhetorical Studies Division. Just after a division meeting in spring 1968, Donovan took me aside and proposed to me that we team-teach a course in the rhetoric of agitation and control. He'd obviously given the topic some thought, and I immediately agreed. We saw the political advantage of a balanced approach to the subject. Almost certainly, the Iowa Legislature would have objected to a course on the rhetoric of agitation in the absence of the rhetoric of control.

For University of Iowa faculty at that time, getting a new course approved was remarkably easy. All we needed was a name for the course and the sanction of a division head (at that time, Donald C. Bryant for our division) and a department chair (at that time, H. Clay Harshbarger). Most decisions at Iowa were made at the lowest possible level, often at the

individual level.[1] We had no “strategic plan.” One day led to another, one thing led to another, one conversation led to another, and one project led to another.

The department used the entire university, considered all aspects of the institution to be permeable and exploitable by people whose frame of reference was rhetorical and communication theory. We looked for, found, and analyzed the symbolic aspects of practically everything.

The university, and especially the department, nourished remarkable freedom and intellectual diversity among its faculty and its students. The climate encouraged innovation. My late colleague Jim Bradac and I (1975, 9), in a paper describing an interdepartmental undergraduate degree program we’d organized, publicly appreciated “the considerable possibilities for flexibility that the University of Iowa provide[d].”

Agents

Donovan Ochs was as good a friend as I had in Iowa City. Our collaboration on *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* focused people's attention on our differences, but we also had a lot of similarities. We both were Iowa natives, he from a farm, I from a farming community. We both had attended Catholic schools, though he remained faithful and I had become an apostate. We both valued learning, and we each respected the other's epistemology. We both were Iowa Ph.D.s, and he reminded me once that, as a graduate student, he'd taken a seminar from me. When conflicts within the institution arose, we both were more likely to take the side of the student than the side of the faculty member or administrator. Donovan became well known as somebody who would rescue students when they were victims of accidents or bureaucracy or faculty ill will. We both were in our thirties. By the time the book was published, my rank was professor and his was associate professor.

After we retired, we both went to work as volunteers for public libraries, he in Solon, IA, I in Boulder, CO. He claimed to be emulating me by choosing library work.

We spent time together. At the university, we collaborated on two different courses (the other was called Resistance to Persuasion), on a book, and on many policy and personnel decisions in the department. At play, we roasted weenies (which once entailed for me a bad case of poison ivy), pretended to be pirates in one of his boats on Lake Macbride, drank beer, sawed and hauled wood, enclosed a fireplace, and moved households via the Solon Moving and Drinking Company at the rate of maybe three a year during the twenty-one years we both were at Iowa. And we built a porch. About once a year, we'd sneak out of our offices for an afternoon movie.

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[1] I'm quoting myself here for a few sentences from "A Garden of Innovation," a lecture I gave at Iowa in spring 2007.

We made wine. The annual fall wine-making in Solon always was one of the high points of my social year. Donovan knew how to bring neighbors and academics together in pleasant and productive enterprises.

He never persuaded me to snowmobile or to fire a black-powder rifle. He did once try unsuccessfully to teach me to water-ski.

But our differences also were substantial and immediately noticeable. He was an extrovert, I, an introvert. He was a conservative Republican, I an ultra-liberal Democrat. Maybe I can sum things up by saying that he'd have supported John Wayne for president while I a few years later would have supported Jane Fonda.

My friend and Donovan's, Valerie Peterson, contributed a relevant memory when she learned that I was writing this paper:

> I've thought quite a bit about Don Ochs over the past few days. I loved how he spoke about you in an NCA spotlight panel, when answering the question of how the two of you worked on a book project when you were so different in so many ways. After mentioning a bunch of possible answers that he might have ventured, he simply said, in that gruff and serious voice, "I just liked the guy!"

Purpose

For both Donovan and me, the situation was interesting. We saw in it an opportunity to teach and, possibly, to theorize. When, eventually, we decided to write the book, we also had visions of fame and fortune. I remember especially one fantasy session we had about inventing the Agitation and Control board game and selling the game on nationally televised talk shows.

In a way, the fame part worked out. Not every critic loved the book, but they spelled our names right. People in general associated both of us more with the book than with anything else we'd done, even though the book was atypical work for both of us. Donovan was generally unaccustomed to theorizing in the scientific sense of the word. I was equally unaccustomed to ventures in a non-experimental universe. I'm borrowing Kenneth Burke's contrast when I say that Donovan's concern, metaphorically, was with salvation, mine with salivation (Burke 1941, 159). We had several local media interviews, including, for me, one a few years later with a Chicago television station.

Fortune was more elusive. We never did develop the board game, and neither of us had a chance to promote sales with national television interviews. I never earned more than $500 in royalties in a single year, and now, with four authors and the newer authors getting a higher percentage, royalties are slim. On the other hand, the University of Iowa considered the book to be both a research and a pedagogical accomplishment, so our work surely entailed upward salary adjustments.

Act

I'll consider our teaching the class and our writing the book to be a unitary act.

After our 1968 meeting with the Rhetorical Studies Division, we decided to offer the course for the first time in spring 1969. That gave us almost a year to plan. We decided early to require that each student do a case study of agitation and control as we were defining those terms. And we knew that we'd do some in-class simulations, assigning students roles as agitators, as administrators, as police agencies, and as media representatives. Donovan located some relevant documentaries including one on the San Francisco State unrest and another on the farmers' union movement.

I don't remember what we used as texts in that first iteration. I thought I recalled that Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* was on our reading list, but I've checked and Alinsky's book was published in 1971. We couldn't have used it in 1969. I think that we had a book on good and bad policing methods by a retired police chief, and I know that we used various government reports on the causes and prevention of violence. I remember learning from one of our sources the elegant concept that in a democracy the state has a theoretical monopoly on violence. Stephen Kaye (1966) had written a dissertation on protest music, and I remember leading the class in songs mostly from the labor movement and the civil rights movement.

During the summer of 1968, the Democrats held their nominating convention in Chicago. That was the convention to choose a candidate to replace Lyndon Johnson, who had been discredited by the Viet Nam war. A few of you will remember the shout, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" The civil disorder surrounding the convention spawned a governmental investigation, and that investigation, before the end of 1968, produced The Walker Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, *Rights in Conflict*. Bantam Books published the report, and as a government document it was in the public domain.

I decided to use my knowledge of the convention as an early supporter of Eugene McCarthy's candidacy, as a registered Democrat who had paid close attention to the convention's television coverage, and as a reader of *Rights in Conflict* to write an analysis of the 1968 convention. We'd use it as model for the case studies students would write. With slight editing, my analysis became Chapter 4, "Agitative Mobilization: Chicago, August 1968."

As we continued to read, and especially when our students began writing case studies with the Chicago essay as model, Donovan and I both perceived the possibility of theoretical generalizations. On the basis of that intuition, we decided to write a book. Addison-Wesley had an adventuresome editor at the time whose name, as I recall, was Pokey Gardner, and she contracted with us for the book. In general, I wrote the sections having to do with agitation, Donovan those concerned with control. I'd already written the Chicago case study, and I decided to do

another focusing on Martin Luther King, Jr., in Birmingham, Alabama. Donovan wrote a case study on the 1968-69 agitation at San Francisco State, a case that I regretfully notice is missing from the third edition.

Addison-Wesley recruited Minnesota's Robert Scott to critique our manuscript. Scott praised what we'd done and suggested that we write a final chapter to synthesize things. Donovan and I wrote that chapter in the closest collaboration of my experience, both working interactively at the same desk at the same time. Using a few variables, the chapter, entitled "The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control: An Interface," asserts principles to predict the outcomes of competent and incompetent agitators and establishments. Both Donovan and I believed that theories should make strong claims rather than weak ones, and the chapter displays that preference.

We proposed a new definition of "rhetoric": *the rationale of instrumental, symbolic behavior*. The definition enabled us to include as rhetorical various nondiscursive elements that, though not primarily symbolic, could be thought of as having symbolic aspects. Agitators throwing bags of feces at policemen, for example, fit our definition because the act could be perceived as having a symbolic aspect of expressing contempt. Instrumentally, the act invited counter-aggression from the police.

We devised an interactive system comprising general strategies and specific tactics employed by agitators and by control agents. The agitational strategies were (italics in the original, p. 17)[2] *petition of the establishment; promulgation; solidification; polarization; nonviolent resistance; escalation/confrontation; guerrilla and Gandhi;* and *revolution*. Control strategies were (italics in the original, p. 41) *avoidance; suppression; adjustment;* and *capitulation*. Hence, for example, in a particular case study one section might be *escalation/confrontation and suppression*. The strategies could generate various tactics, and we left the lists of tactics open-ended. Tactics of solidification, for example, included those we named (italics in the original, p. 20) *plays, songs, slogans, expressive and esoteric symbols,* and *in-group publications*, but the door was left open for unnamed other tactics in the service of solidification.

One thought of Donovan's was particularly helpful. As I remember his utterance, it was, "Establishments must take all threats seriously." In the book (p. 40), it took the form of a generalization (italics in the original), "*Decision-makers must assume that the worst will happen in a given instance of agitation*" with a corollary, "*Decision-makers must be prepared to repel any overt attack on the establishment*" (Bowers and Ochs 1971, 40). We anticipated by thirty-five years the Cheney doctrine that establishments for whom a threat is only one percent probable must act as though it is a certainty (Suskind 2006).

I don't remember a conscious decision to call our elements "strategies" and "tactics." In retrospect, I perceive that our use of those

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[2] All quotations are from the first edition: Bowers & Ochs (1971).

terms benefited the analysis. And we seem to have foreshadowed a major trend toward "strategy" in the discipline, where I frequently encounter the term "strategic communication" when the context implies what I think of as "persuasion."

First, the terms partake both of real life and of games and game theory. We could easily employ them in an interactive sense.

Second, they allowed us to discuss competence both among agitators and among control agents. In some movements, for example, establishments move to the strategy of suppression too quickly, prompting unnecessary and unnecessarily prolonged violence. In others, agitators jump to a strategy of escalation/confrontation too rapidly, sacrificing the credibility that would have been gained in lower-level, more conventional, strategies.

Third, the strategic and tactical concepts enabled us to construct an interactive grid (Bowers and Ochs 1971, p. 139) in which one of the variables, "rhetorical sophistication," was a function of wisdom in whether and when to employ specific strategies for the most probable good or least bad outcomes. From the grid, we proposed six predictive generalizations.

Finally, the open-ended nature of the "tactics" lists facilitated the job of future co-authors in later editions as they took into account new media and new manifestations of the strategies.

Agency

If teaching and writing are the acts, then I'll consider the course and the book to be the agency.

During spring 1971, when we taught the course for the second time, the Iowa Student Senate decided to sponsor a course evaluation project, and a committee of the Senate approached all undergraduate teachers to enlist their cooperation. The result was an extensive set of rating scales filled out in hundreds of undergraduate classes and tabulated by the student committee. Representatives of the committee also conducted exit interviews with a few students.

The Senate's publication of results gave incomparably high praise to "Rhetoric of Agitation and Control," definitely a rave (Iowa Student Association Senate 1971):

> The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control received some overwhelmingly high ratings, with 86% of the students really enjoying it! 93% of the students responding gave it either above or far above average overall ratings. The rest of the statistics can speak for themselves. We need more courses like this one!

On the basis of the overwhelming student demand resulting from that review, Donovan and I team-taught the course every year for several years. Eventually, I developed it into my more general course, Communication and Conflict, a course I taught solo from then on.

I know that Bruce Gronbeck intends later in this series to characterize the book, and I won't try to anticipate him. I'll note that it's been in almost continuous production with at least three publishers for the forty-one years since its initial publication in 1971. It now is in its third edition with the original definitional and theoretical sections intact. I'll just conclude with a few lines from the preface of the first edition:

After reading the book, the student should be able to specify rather precisely the rhetorical ingredients used by agitators and establishments in their recipes for social change and social control. [The student] should have assimilated a frame of reference that, if used habitually, will sharpen . . . analytic skills. Finally, [the student] should be able to predict, within reasonable limits, the outcomes of agitational events as they occur.

I believe that our collaboration fulfilled those promises.

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