

Symbolic Power as a Dimension of Public Life

by

James F. Klumpp
University of Maryland at College Park

Presented at the Speech Communication Association
Annual Convention, Atlanta GA, November 1991

The nation's capital represents an example of the successes of the last great movement for political empowerment -- the Civil Rights movement. Give the vote, and with it will come access to the institutions of government. Once the voice of the disempowered is heard, democracy empowers. Today, a majority of the electorate in Washington is African-American and minority leaders have governed the District for more than two decades. The local institutions of Washington provide many fora for access to District government.

Yet, Washington also depresses those dedicated to democratic empowerment. The leadership of district government passed from the cantankerous Walter Washington to the addict Marion Barry. This summer, Hispanics rioted amid charges that African-Americans once denied access to government by a white power structure now denied such access to Hispanics. But, the institutional problems of Washington can hide more fundamental failures. Today, the streets of Washington are filled with a generation trapped in an underculture of despair, drugs, and death. So tenuous has the connection with civility become in some communities within the city that insults, disputes over jackets and radios, and rivalries over relationships fail to be resolved through discourse and become cause for killing. The power of the gun rules the power of the voice. As depressing as Washington DC may be, we should not too quickly isolate the problem to American minorities. Robert Bellah and his colleagues eloquently document the feeling of despair extending through the American middle class.¹

In fact, part of my purpose today is to expand the gaze of our discipline in its concern for empowerment. My argument is that true empowerment must be sensitive to the way a particular theory which informs our vision of empowerment may constrain that vision. I wish to examine traditional rhetorical theory and

¹ Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

persuasion theory as it informs our framing of the vision of empowerment, and to suggest the differences implied by a symbolic theory. My judgement will be critical, that the assumptions that underlie traditional theory define a vision of limited potential constrained by the reality of current political practice, and a symbolic rhetoric offers a more liberating vision of the rhetorical basis for a theory of empowerment.

The Limiting Assumptions of Traditional Theory

In critiquing the empowerment implied in traditional rhetorical theory and persuasion theory, I focus on five particular characteristics of the theories. I selected these not because they summarize the whole theory, but because they are near the center of the place where the theory intersects our vision of empowerment, are vital to the theory, and because they define the limits of that vision.

Rhetoric as Mediation

Our traditional rhetorical theory is based on a model that conceptually separates institutions from rhetorical action, and arrays these separated concepts so the power of discourse is limited to the power to persuade others to then instrumentally effect change. The purest statement of this assumption is probably in Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation":

A work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change. In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive.²

In this formulation, rhetoric's power is indirect, dependent on a primary power of influence through direct action. In political terms this means that the primary power of change is institutional. Thus, the power of rhetoric to change is only as viable as the potential for change within the institution that forms a target context for the rhetoric.

² Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (January 1968): 3-4.

It is important to make an additional point about this characteristic -- the inventional restriction it proposes. The speaker must assess institutional power to select a target for his or her discourse. Ultimately the power of discourse rests on this judgement, so the power is not intrinsic in rhetoric but primary in institutions. The separation of rhetoric and political institutions entails separation in our judgement of them. As scholars of rhetoric our domain is to develop our vision of the secondary power -- rhetoric and persuasion. The mediational perspective thus leaves us marginal in considerations of empowerment.

The Decision Framework

Because our view places rhetoric as secondary, our theory becomes molded to the character of the primary power. Constrained by a particular view of institutions, our rhetorical theory adopts a comparatively narrow framework for persuasive purpose. I focus upon two particular characteristics of our rhetorical theory dictated by the narrow decision framework: propositional logic and the materialization of values. The focus upon propositions frames discourse in terms of the change logic of the addressed institution. It is a common experience for rhetorical critics who are dealing with discourse considered hostile to established institutions to find the propositional character of logic and persuasion unsatisfactory as a critical tool.³ This flows from the conservative character of the propositional idea. Propositions must be well-formed, and well-formed is defined by the institutions within which they operate: legislative, judicial, administrative, or whatever. When we seek to empower through the teaching of a propositional logic, we are seriously limiting the avenues of empowerment.

The materialization of values has a similar purpose. Values enter our political discourse in questions such as: "Is he committed to family values?" Values are considered to be "things" which can be given, retained, or lost. Thus given

³ Many studies of movement rhetoric in the 1960s and 1970s employed methods which ignored propositional logic. The most overt statement of this ill-fit was Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith's in their classic "The Rhetoric of Confrontation": "The rhetoric of confrontation also poses new problems for rhetorical theory. Since the time of Aristotle, academic rhetorics have been for the most part instruments of established society, presupposing the 'goods' of order, civility, reason, decorum, and civil or theocratic law. . . . Even if the presuppositions of civility and rationality underlying the old rhetoric are sound, they can no longer be treated as self-evident." Quarterly Journal of Speech 55 (February 1969): 8.

material character, values become objects towards which institutions or people can become committed, and which can serve as a focus of discussion and debate. This characteristic makes values isolatable from practical experience. Values thus become specific subjects for debate -- we can declare abstract support - - decisions about practical action are free to rest on "the facts." The alienation of value from fact elevates factuality and ties empowerment to access to these facts.

Linearity

In order to draw the linkages between persuasion and institutions, our model punctuates the rhetorical act with a clear beginning, process, and end. The beginning is depicted as a time when a speaker as author assesses the predisposition of the target audience and formulates discourse with the purpose of disrupting the status quo ante of the predisposition. The message is delivered. Change is judged to occur if the post-message disposition is different from the predisposition.

Several characteristics mark this model of rhetoric as impoverished. First, it isolates the rhetor. Of course, we urge the rhetor to associate himself or herself with traditional arguments. In the extreme we urge the rhetor to see himself or herself as part of a persuasive campaign. But always there is an alienation in our perspective that views invention as the product of an individual mind whose influence is judged in terms of the mind's objective. Urging empowerment with such a model which easily is belied by the power differential of an isolated citizen facing the massed power of political institutions is obviously a questionable enterprise.

Second, however, this model impoverishes our rhetoric because it constructs the target of our discourse as a static, isolated, mental entity. Such a simple characterization of institutions -- particularly in the tendency of such characterization to reduce systems to their parts and the relationships within them rather than seeing them as powerful in their own right -- sends our rhetorical discourse humming into the oblivion of the isolation assumption.

Third, the linearity assumption narrows our gaze to consider only the short term payoffs of our rhetorical action. The narrowly punctuated account which our theory provides evaluates influence in terms of the goal formulated in the initial stages of the persuasive act. Thus, rhetorical power is similarly limited.

In the face of the power relationships that mark contemporary political reality, the principle of linearity leaves us assuming a kind of equality of power at the base of rhetorical

discourse. The reality of power of individual initiative facing institutional resistance casts doubt on the viability of this approach to empowerment.

Authority by Expertise

Perhaps the most subtle of the characteristics of our rhetorical theory is the elevation of expertise as a basis for authority. Our primary charge to speakers is to become knowledgeable in the facts of the subject before formulating their message. My argument is not against knowledge. But our contemporary concept of knowledge is far too imbalanced as a "knowing about . . ." rather than a "knowing through . . ." The result is that we privilege expertness. This characteristic follows from the derivative power of rhetoric from the current institutional political framework which privileges credentialed expertise. Perhaps the clearest example of this characteristic is in our intercollegiate debaters who today take the use of direct quotation to be the highest form of proof, and whose skills in selecting, preparing, and marshalling quotation is far better than their skills in the formulation of arguments of other forms.

It seems to me important to realize that such a construction of authority rests far from a democratic assumption of pluralistic bases for authority. We hear the point when silence is imposed by an "if you had the information I have, you would agree with me." We hear the point when we condemn political debate because it does not illuminate the "issues." We hear the point when our access to government is the "highly placed source." Such a framework for making judgements of credibility predetermines rhetorical power in a way that makes our pleas for empowerment hollow.

The Image of the Citizen

There is in this theory an implied image of the citizen. Citizenship is constituted most specifically as a voter. Voters in turn are depicted in our political communication literature as the respondents to the strategic messages of campaign managers. Our media provide spectator coverage of campaigns and voters are urged to exercise the fundamental rights of democracy -- voting. The citizen as voter is the narrowest of all images of democratic participation.

There is a second aspect of this image of the citizen, however, that potentially promises more power for the citizen -- the power of participation in public business. Attend your local governmental meetings; organize your neighborhood watch group; write your congressmen. Time does not permit individual analysis

of each of these instances, but notice how all place the citizen's participation within speaking situations defined by institutions and all are marked by situations in which the isolated citizen forum exists within the context of alternative power relationships. Indeed, despite the occasional loud exception, do any of us doubt that the citizen appearing at a zoning hearing has a power equivalent of the developer seeking a permit to subdivide, or the citizen writing to the congressman will have an impact equal to the lobbyist who has contributed thousands to an election campaign and subsequently provided the member of Congress with "hard data"? Perhaps the diminished participation of citizens in established governmental institutions is paradoxically encouraged by citizens who compare the "effectiveness" our theory promises with the pragmatic results of their participation. Our concept of citizenship has become narrower and narrower as power has migrated to institutions capable of perpetuating themselves.

The Relationship between Political and Rhetorical Theory

Because of the mediated character, our persuasive theory is grounded in current political theory. The concept of power in current political theory assumes an uneven distribution. There are winners and losers in the power game. Robert Dahl is typical of theorists of current politics when he defines power in his influential classic, Modern Political Analysis, as "coercive influence" achieved by the management of rewards and punishments.⁴ In addition, current political theory conceptualizes power and influence in terms of the relationships between individuals. Concepts of institution, community and culture are seen as summative concepts mapped by relationships between individuals, and these collective concepts are treated as individual actors who in turn reward or punish individuals. Two questions come to mind: Under this definition, how much power does the citizen constituted in a single vote wield? When we discuss empowerment, do we really mean that we wish a citizen to enhance his or her management of reward and punishment?

The practice of politics today is largely viewed as synonymous with the practice of government. This limitation on the concept serves to legitimate governmental institutions and those who control them. Questions of power are thus posed in limited ways which structure the ways that we see our potential involvement in power.

⁴ Modern Political Analysis (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 50. The classic statement of the traditional political theory of power is in Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, Power and Society (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1950).

One final characteristic of our political theory is also important to point to: the focus on government as an instrument of change. This is, in truth, a recent development in the history of American democracy, largely given force by the same elevation of "effectiveness" that informs our current rhetorical theory. Politics is seen as "getting things done." This politics is formulated in terms of policy goals and strategies and effectiveness of political actors in achieving the goals. Thus, the political theory, like the rhetorical theory, is linear, propositional, and mediated.

Some Characteristics of an Alternative Vision

I am far too early in my work to provide a fully formed vision of symbolic empowerment, and this short time would not lend itself to a full treatment anyway. Instead, today I have a more limited objective: to outline a series of moves which I believe hold the promise of a more fundamental concept of empowerment based in a symbolic rhetoric.⁵

First, a symbolic empowerment would ground empowerment in theories of language rather than theories of politics. Contemporary European theorists -- Foucault may be the most notable example -- locate power specifically in the constraints and capabilities of language manifest in discourse practices. Rather than working from current political theory, we need to more aggressively work toward grounding empowerment in the textual power of language.

This grounding would lead us to ask different questions about the rhetorical function. We would be more interested in accounts of the construction of relationships of power in discursive practices. What sort of power relationships does a particular rhetoric constitute? What are the possibilities for empowerment within that rhetoric?

⁵ By the symbolic rhetorics I refer to the move within contemporary rhetorical theory to shift the accounts of rhetorical practice from strategic calculations of individuals to the social construction of community. The rhetorics of Kenneth Burke and the European post-structuralists stand out as examples. These rhetorics are marked by their merger of theory and praxis in discourse practices. Dialectic merger is the key to such rhetorics. The rhetorics are built on language's power to create communities of meaning from the merger of various contexts including the social, political, material, moral, and economic. Symbolic rhetorics are created in the creative dialectic between individual and community voice.

Second, such a theory should punctuate empowerment as a creative, macro force rather than a limited practical question. The punctuation of goal-strategy-effect which marks power in political theory and our derivative rhetorical theory views power in terms of individual moments. As an alternative we need to think of empowerment in much longer terms. The relationships within which a stable rhetoric is performed over a long period -- perhaps even as long as Foucault's discourse formations -- promise far greater significance in terms of empowerment. Rhetorical practice shapes the framework that entails empowerment. If we can punctuate our accounts at this broader level, we empower participation in a much more significant process.

Third, a symbolic theory should frame empowerment as a characteristic of human community rather than within the relationship of the individual and government. That power somehow inheres in government is a limiting concept in our current concepts of power. Most obviously, power exists in institutions beyond government. For example, we are beginning to view power as a dimension of relationships within the family. But even this restriction of our analysis of power to institutions is a limitation. Place power into the heart of our rhetorical theory rather than as an external variable.

The basic rhetorical power in symbolic theories is the power to constitute meaning within the context of community. Robert Bellah and his colleagues address the concept of disempowerment which this rhetoric addresses.

The extent to which many Americans can understand the workings of our economic and social organization is limited by the capacity of their chief moral language to make sense of human interaction. The limit set by individualism is clear; events that escape the control of individual choice and will cannot coherently be encompassed in a moral calculation.⁶

There is, of course, some irony here. We have thought of empowerment in terms of the individual's relationship with government and institutions. From the perspective of symbolic rhetoric, however, empowerment of the individual rests in the textual capability of a community to articulate coherence in its world. A rhetoric that would empower meaning to the ongoing experience of a community provides the textual linkages between historical, political, and moral contexts that motivate action.

Fourth, symbolic empowerment should rest on a critical rhetoric rather than a strategic rhetoric. Ray McKerrow's call

⁶ Habits of the Heart, p. 204.

for a critical rhetoric is a key to this approach to empowerment. One of the essential characteristics of a critical rhetoric is that it reverses the relationship between a rhetoric and its presuppositions. A traditional rhetoric is marked by careful adaptation to the characteristics of situation and subject matter. In a critical rhetoric, the reflexiveness makes the rhetorical practice a subject matter of the discourse. This allows the critical rhetoric to penetrate the assumptions of the situation in a way that illuminates the power dimension that structures the rhetoric. In addition, a critical rhetoric transforms critique into the basis for change. A rhetorical theory that features the symbolic powers of language to create and critique the grounds of its own power moves freedom and domination to a central place in rhetorical considerations.

Empowerment through such a theory gives us a citizen who locates political participation and responsibility in an awareness of the distribution of power as a dimension of symbolic action. The institutional location implied in the term "citizen" is transferred from the political unit to a concept as abstract as the "community." The community is being formed and reformed continuously in the symbolic interaction of practical discourse. Empowerment recognizes the power entailed in participation in such a process. Time is punctuated not in the goal-strategy-effect cycle of individual will, but in the continual creativity of community formation.

Conclusion

The project in process is to bring symbolic power into the ongoing development of citizenship. The need for empowerment in our time is more than a need for individual access to traditional institutions for traditional purposes. The need is more basic: to create a conception of citizenship that returns power over lives to communities of daily activity.

Interestingly enough, one of the places we can turn for a starting point for such a project is Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson never tied a civic life to formal government. He believed that participation in public life involved the constant practical, moral dialogue from which the bonds of friendship and community emerged. Jefferson's belief in republican government grew out of, rather than replaced, this view of the simple practical day-to-day knitting of community.

The symbolic rhetorics which feature the creative power of community formation as a resource for individual power promise a renewed avenue for understanding and activating Jefferson's vision.