Session #628: “Revisionist Histories of Composition”

Collecting Our Racist Uncles: An Exhortation to Seek

Our Worst Selves in the History of Rhetoric

Until relatively recently, I would have self-identified as a historian of composition, but in the past few years, my research has taken a unsettling turn. I’ll spare you the extended intellectual autobiography, but not the abridged one because it helps contextualize the argument I want to make today, which is that rhetoric and composition historians need to do a better job of seeing history’s worst actors as part of our tradition. I’ll explain more later, but first, to that abridged autobiography that I promised.

In June 2015, Donald Trump announced his candidacy for President, and I was fortunate to be in a place in my career where I could study and write about Trump’s rhetoric.

Don’t worry—this talk is not about Trump. It’s about Hitler.

Fascinating as I found Trump-the-candidate, I was equally fascinated by the rapid emergence of Trump/Hitler comparisons. Even before his inauguration, scores of Trump/Hitler pieces were published in reputable popular press outlets around the country. In several cases, they were written by world-renowned scholars of Nazism and fascism.

A significant number of the comparisons were made on the grounds that both Trump and Hitler were populist speakers. That is, the comparisons hinged on similarities in their
rhetoric. But unlike historians, rhetoricians were not prominent in the popular press. The one important exception is Jennifer Mercieca, a Communication-Rhetoric scholar at Texas A&M. Still most of the people making rhetorical comparisons didn’t have any training in rhetoric and couldn’t really explain if Trump’s rhetoric actually was like Hitler’s.

Here’s the thing—neither could I. Despite holding a PhD in rhetoric and composition, and despite having studied and published about political rhetoric for more than a decade, the grounds for such comparisons were unexpectedly opaque to me. Even more unexpected, the weak rhetorical link was Hitler, one of the most studied men of all time and the [QUOTE] “ideal example of the evil power of evil rhetoric.” [END QUOTE]

In the past several years, rhetoric scholars have produced a number of important analyses of Trump’s rhetoric. At the same time, studies of Hitler’s rhetoric are rather scant. Hitler gave more than 5,000 public speeches from 1919-1945, many of which have been translated in whole or in part into multiple languages. He is acknowledged by rhetoricians and historians alike as [QUOTE] “one of the great orators of history, perhaps the greatest in the twentieth century” [END QUOTE]. But notwithstanding some significant exceptions, Hitler has never received much sustained attention from scholars of rhetoric, and almost none since the 1960s. For more than half a century, Adolf Hitler has existed more as a bogeyman for rhetoricians than a subject of scholarly inquiry. Consequently, Hitler’s rhetoric is still something of a mystery to people who study such things for a living.

Of course, if we didn’t have Hitler as a bogeyman, we’d have to invent him. He’s the edge of the rhetorical map, the extreme cautionary tale, the rhetorical monster we invoke as a ward against our own monstrosity. For that reason alone, he demands more of our attention.
But he also epitomizes an entire class of awful-but-highly-effective rhetors that disciplinary historians have more or less ignored. I hope you’ll permit me a small handful of additional, illustrative examples.

First, King Leopold the Second of Belgium. Leopold is one of the 19th century’s great monsters. He was the founder of the Congo Free State and one of the chief architects of colonial diamond mining in Africa. During his 20-year reign, Leopold was responsible for an untold number of human atrocities, and historians put the Congo’s death toll as a result of his policies somewhere around 10 million people. Of particular interest to rhetoric scholars, however, is the so-called “Congo Free State Propaganda War” that Leopold launched to shape public sentiment about his [QUOTE] “humanitarian deeds.” Leopold paid editors at respectable newspapers to run positive content about the Congo for years. It’s not a stretch to say Leopold is the godfather of modern media PR campaigns. Despite this, he’s all but absent in the field’s histories.

Second, Basil Zaharoff—a man whose monstrosity bridged the 19th and 20th centuries. Zaharoff’s name is likely unfamiliar because he worked hard to remain as anonymous as possible, but his nickname might ring a bell. He is more commonly known as “the merchant of death” for his role in the global arms trade. Zaharoff became one of the richest men in the world by selling armaments—including planes and submarines—to opposing sides in conflicts. He single-handedly created a massive arms race that helped touch off World War I. Intentionally or not, Zaharoff took a page out of Leopold’s rhetorical book of paying for positive press coverage, but he took it a step farther by buying controlling stakes in newspapers. He also bought endowed chairs at several European universities to launder his reputation, including a
Chair of English Literature at the University of Paris and Chair of French Literature at Oxford. He even got himself knighted by the Brits. But like Leopold, despite his wild rhetorical successes, Zaharoff’s nowhere to be found in rhetoric and composition histories.

Third and finally, Edward Bernays—a thoroughly 20th century monster. Unlike Leopold and Zaharoff, Bernays has garnered some attention in rhetorical studies, but as Sharon J. Kirsch points out, [ONE] it hasn’t been much, and [TWO] the attention he has garnered has often been relatively positive because of his reputation as a pioneer of public relations. Indeed, Bernays was one of the most influential theorists of propaganda in the 20th century, which he rebranded as public relations. He was also a master practitioner. Among his other "accomplishments," Bernays was instrumental in manufacturing a red scare in Guatemala in the 1940s, which resulted in a CIA-backed military coup that deposed a democratically elected president and replaced him with a business-friendly dictator. The reason? The Guatemalan government was trying to enforce regulations on the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita), which Bernays represented. In order to protect United Fruit’s profits, Bernays set out to destroy the Guatemalan government, which he did! Even better, he was hired by the banana company because of his PR successes for tobacco companies. His particular innovation in the tobacco industry was tying weight loss to smoking so more women would buy cigarettes. Bernays even apparently knew about early research linking tobacco use to cancer, but he ignored it.

Trump, Hitler, Leopold, Zaharoff, and Bernays are just the tip of a very large rhetorical iceberg. Some of the most powerful persuaders of the last two centuries and more have been bad actors—people who have, as Plato might say, “made the weaker argument appear the stronger.” And indeed, it makes sense that rhetoric and composition scholars have not invested
deeply in recovering rhetorical monsters. For nearly 40 years, the field’s revisionary historians have done invaluable work [ONE] arguing that we need better, more representative histories, and [TWO] writing those histories. Given these two objectives, revisionary histories commonly revolve around what we might call “positive representation” in pursuit of social justice. That is, revisionary historians have made a concerted effort to recover positive examples of diverse rhetorical traditions in order to demonstrate the limits of the canonical Rhetorical Tradition.

I’m not here to discount that work, nor to recommend an end to it. Quite the contrary. I’m here to call for a complementary extension of revisionary historical research into countervailing rhetorical forces. That is, often in our disciplinary search for positive representation, we have disavowed the bad people speaking well that lurk in our history. But the history of rhetoric is filled with highly-effective rhetors who are emblematic of how awful humans can be to one another. And these rhetors belong to us and our intellectual traditions at least as much as some of the positive examples that revisionary historians have recovered. Disavowing Hitler’s rhetorical gifts is no more effective for stopping them than blocking your racist uncle on Facebook.

At the same time, I don’t want to suggest anything like a recovery project for Hitler in the way revisionary historians commonly conceive of their work. I am definitely not claiming that we should make a positive representative example of him. Rather, I contend that we can, and we should, think about recovering history’s bad rhetorical actors in the way internet denizens talk of “collecting our racist uncles.” As the characteristically helpful Urban Dictionary defines it, collecting is [QUOTE] “When someone is acting badly (racist/sexist/generally shitty)
and people from the group that they belong to are called upon to keep them in check.” [END QUOTE]

And here I want to conclude by suggesting that revisionary collecting is a project particularly for people like me—that is, people who present and identify as members of dominant/dominating classes. Anyone is welcome to join the cause, of course, but the responsibility is mine. In case you’re not seeing me as you hear or read this talk, I am white, cis male, straight, American, highly-educated, mostly economically-secure, and so on. The field’s histories are littered with good men speaking well to my general experience. But many of the bad people speaking well are also more or less characteristic of my general experience. That is, they belong to groups to which I belong. Our rhetorical monsters are, in some important ways, my uncles saying racist/sexist/generally shitty things. And as we work toward a better, more just future, I think “we”—which is to say, “people like me”—are called upon to collect them—to try to keep them in check. But until we know them better, until we’ve studied what they’ve done rhetorically and how they’ve done it, we are at a critical disadvantage. Therefore, as I see the task before (some of) us, we need to confront our worst past selves, to acknowledge them as our relations, in order to better understand the rhetorical conditions in which we currently struggle.