

▲ Introduction

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The ability to create a sense of community, and thus the possibility of social and political life as we know it, depends on the human capacity for communication. For thousands of years, scholars and laity alike have recognized that the complexities of human communication are linked tightly to the unique and varied forms of social interaction. Twenty-four hundred years ago, for example, Isocrates—a teacher of both Plato and Aristotle, and identified by some as perhaps the most important classical advocate of a rhetorical education—advised his students that the “art of discourse” was “that power which, of all the faculties which belong to the nature of man, is the source of most of our blessings.” The reasons he gave for this became central components of what was to become known as civic humanism: “In the other powers which we possess . . . we are in no respect superior to other living creatures; nay, we are inferior to many in swiftness and in strength and in other resources; but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of the wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us establish.”¹

Given the centrality of the art of discourse to human, social, and political endeavors, it is not at all surprising that academics, preachers, politi-

cians, entrepreneurs, and an almost incalculable host of others have all attended closely to the problems and possibilities of human communication. This breadth of attention to the power and art of discourse by groups and individuals with fundamentally different purposes and orientations has produced a wide range of approaches to the study of human communication. One of the most powerful of such approaches from antiquity to the present has operated under the rubric of “rhetoric” or “rhetorical studies.” As we note in the introduction to Part I, the definition of “rhetoric” is itself a highly contested concept, and its meaning has varied widely, both across the ages and within any given time period. And while the advent of digital communication has ushered in new ways of communicating, the need for rhetoric continues. Moreover, in an age where humans are increasingly focused on the devices that they hold in their hands and swipe with their fingers, a reminder of the centrality that rhetoric plays in important human interactions is perhaps even timelier.

Our goal in this essay is not to provide a history of the concept of “rhetoric” from classical times to the present, although we do strongly encourage anyone interested in the discipline or study of contemporary rhetorical theory to consult its long and interesting heritage and to consider the impact that its various pasts have had upon its present study and uses.² Rather, our purpose here is to provide a brief introduction to the contemporary

issues and concerns that have animated the work of rhetorical theorists since the late 1960s—a time of great social, political, and intellectual change. Of course, the contemporary interest in rhetorical theory cannot be completely bracketed and divorced from the interests and concerns of the larger histories of rhetoric that rhetorical theorists have crafted for themselves as a discipline. By the same token, however, it would be difficult to understand the complexities and conceptual importance of contemporary rhetorical theory if we focused primarily on the relationship between past and present. Our approach here, then, is to contextualize the interests and concerns of contemporary rhetorical theorists *both* historically and conceptually as they have manifested themselves over the past fifty-some years. To that end, we begin by offering a brief survey of some of the key conceptual assumptions made by contemporary rhetorical theorists that derive from an understanding of the theory and practice of rhetoric in classical antiquity. Following that, we consider how these assumptions have been contextualized and made problematic in the work of contemporary American rhetorical theorists.

Contemporary Rhetorical Theory's Link to the Past

The earliest theorists of rhetoric are typically identified in the Western, liberal-democratic tradition as residing in ancient Greece and Rome; not so coincidentally, they are equally identified with the creation of democratic and republican forms of government. In this classical tradition, the focus on rhetoric typically emphasized the *public*, *persuasive*, and *contextual* characteristics of human discourse in situations governed by the problems of *contingency*.

Contingent situations occur when decisions have to be made and acted upon, but decision makers are forced to rely upon probabilities rather than certainties. Examples of such situations typically include deliberating on what the best course for future action might be, or deciding guilt or innocence where the evidence is purely circumstantial. In either situation one must rely upon judgments derived from the probability or likelihood of “truth,” rather than on certain knowledge. Even when there is an eyewitness to an alleged crime, we cannot know for *certain* what the witness saw. Some witnesses might actually lie about what they saw, while the testimony of other witnesses might

be tainted—inadvertently or not—by prejudice or point of view. This is one of the reasons why our contemporary judicial system places so much importance on the cross-examination of witnesses. Judgments about guilt or innocence are always about past actions, but determinations of how one ought to act in consequence of such judgments—the goals of deliberative assemblies like the legislature—are no less problematic in their reliance upon probability as a guide to belief and action. Short of consulting a crystal ball, we can never know for *certain* what the best future course of action might be, for it has yet to happen and it is impossible to take into account the multiple events that might intervene between making the decision and enacting it. The best we can do is to make reasoned decisions based on our knowledge of the past and the likelihood of future possibilities.

The emphasis on *public* discourse focused attention on communicative acts that affected the entire community and were typically performed before the law courts, the legislative assemblies, and occasional celebratory gatherings of the citizenry-at-large. Public discourse was thus distinguished from technical discourse addressed to specialized or elite audiences (e.g., the discourses of astronomy or medicine) and private discourse addressed to more personal audiences that did not directly affect the social and political community-at-large (e.g., family communication, master–slave interactions). The ability to contribute to public policy debates and to affect the direction and life of the community through public discourse was taken by classical teachers of rhetoric as an essential attribute of the educated citizen and thus very highly valued.

Quite naturally, given the classical commitments to democratic and republican forms of governance, public discourse was valorized because of its capacity for *persuasion*—that is, its ability to affect belief and behavior through the power of symbolic interaction. One entailment of this commitment was the belief that the ways in which something was expressed and engaged in public discourse had an important, determining effect on meaning and behavior. This point of view stood in contrast to the position of many philosophers (and later scientists) who treated discourse as a neutral conduit for representing an otherwise objective independent “truth.” From the more philosophical point of view, discourse could function to clarify or confuse meaning, to make objective and predetermined “truths” appear more or less attractive, but

it could not actually affect the truth of the thing being described or discussed. Rhetoricians vehemently disputed this point of view, arguing instead that particularly in the context of social and political affairs, the manner and form of discourse was integral to the “truth” of the thing being described and played a central role in shaping and motivating collective identity and action. So, for example, rhetoricians believed that the particular words and narratives used to characterize the Athenian “people” as “courageous” and “peace-loving” in a ceremonial funeral oration were not merely neutral descriptors of these particular qualities, but central to the act of defining what it meant to be “Athenian.” And in a similar fashion, they believed that the particular “reasons” that a speaker expressed for why Athens ought to go to war with Sparta were central to their effectiveness in motivating those who thought of themselves as “Athenians” to sacrifice their lives and property for their city-state. Public discourse was thus understood as potentially (perhaps even inherently) persuasive, and hence central to life in a democratic or republican polity.

Finally, the classical rhetorical perspective treated the relationship between language and meaning as *contextual*. This is to say that the meaning of a particular linguistic usage (e.g., tropes, figures of speech, narratives, examples) derived from the particular experiences and understanding of a particular audience addressed by a particular speaker at a specific moment in time. The metaphor “I have a dream” took on a very special meaning when uttered by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in the presence of 250,000 black and white American citizens sitting literally in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in the early 1960s and demanding that the U.S. Congress pass civil rights legislation.

This is not to suggest that linguistic meaning is variable in all directions at all time, for language usages are also rooted in broader historical and cultural contexts. What we do mean to suggest, however, is that the capacity for meaning in any linguistic usage is almost always subject to change and adaptation. Take, for example, the evolution—over a relatively short period of time—of the Black Lives Matter campaign. A loosely organized movement addressing the problems of structural racism, the campaign got its start in the wake of George Zimmerman’s shooting Trayvon Martin to death in 2013. In only two years, it had grown into both a national platform with which to challenge presidential candidates and an international concern

for marginalized voices in places like Canada and Ghana. Black Lives Matters gains resonance from the historical work done by Martin Luther King, Jr., even as it hugs the contours of contemporary, and complex, discussions relating to instances of police brutality in black communities. A rhetorical perspective on the relationship between language and meaning thus stands in stark contrast to more philosophical and scientific perspectives, which presume either that the meaning of linguistic usages is permanent and universal, or that it is essentially ahistorical, fundamentally unaffected by the particular communicative contexts in which it is employed.

The classical focus on discourse as *contingent*, *public*, *persuasive*, and *contextual* has clearly influenced the ways in which contemporary rhetoricians have treated the role and significance of public communication. Of most importance has been the focus of attention on texts that address the public-at-large, rather than on private correspondences or philosophical treatises addressed to elite, intellectual audiences. The rationale here is that whatever the private goals motivating individuals to act might be, it is usually only once a public or the citizenry is persuaded to endorse and act upon communally shared goals that history moves forward (or backward) in significant ways. The methods of transmission may vary—the pamphlet and the newspaper are being supplanted by the digital archive and database; the letter to the editor is being replaced by the Tweet and the podcast—even as the focus on *publicness* remains. Whereas someone uninterested in rhetoric might prefer to study the private letters of Winston Churchill in order to understand how his leadership helped England to stave off the threat of fascism posed by Adolf Hitler, a rhetorician would be inclined to focus on important speeches, such as Churchill’s “War Situation I.” While the media at large may focus on how Tweets helped to spread the righteous indignation of the Arab Spring across the Middle East and North Africa, the rhetorician would be interested in how this relatively new form of communicating influenced the action of public agents acting on the ground and in support of toppling autocratic dictators. The influence of classical rhetoric’s emphasis on the public dimension of communication interaction has thus clearly been evidenced in contemporary rhetoricians’ choices of artifacts to study.

The classical rhetorical emphasis on context and persuasiveness also yields a different set of questions for contemporary rhetoricians. A social

scientific or philosophical view of Churchill's speech would more than likely condemn Churchill as a fuzzy-headed optimist who juggled literary tropes and figures and drastically misrepresented the world. The rhetorician, however, mindful of the power that specific metaphors have in addressing specific audiences, would likely conclude that Churchill was mindful of addressing a British audience hoping for the eventual involvement of the United States. The social scientific or philosophical approach to the use of Twitter during the Arab Spring would likely focus on quantifying the amount of data used to send Tweets or raise questions about the content's relationship to theories of nonviolence. While these are important questions, they largely ignore the increasingly important role that social media play—that is, their role in publicly declaring as concerns a set of conditions lived by people who have been marginalized and cut off from the use of rhetoric in other media to transform and empower.

The point we want to emphasize here is that classical rhetoricians brought a distinctive set of assumptions to the study of communication that underscored the ways in which advocates—typically public speakers or orators—actively sought to exert influence on a specific audience by strategically deploying language in the interest of an immediate and particular goal. These assumptions, however, were not uncontested, and over the centuries would prove to be precarious. To begin with, the trajectory of Western thought from Plato's Academy through the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment of reason and well into the scientific modernism of the past century spawned an intellectual predisposition for theories of knowledge in which the values of universality and objectivity were privileged over those of particularity, situatedness, and subjectivity or intersubjectivity. Rhetoric, with its commitment to the later cluster of values, has a minimal role to play in such a world.

Ironically enough, however, even as rhetoric was being held up to contempt in the intellectual world of the Enlightenment and its modernist aftermath, its presence and significance in the everyday world were increasingly pronounced, particularly in Western Europe and the United States, where the rapid growth of the public sphere came to play an increasingly prominent role in commerce and political decision making. The rapidity of that growth continues unabated. The rising influence of countries like China, India, and Brazil, and the reemergence of Russia as a contro-

versial player in political and economic matters, reinforce the need to attend to broader historical trends while attending to the particularities of culture, time, and place. In an age where the physical distance between interlocutors has been in large part reduced to the issue of access to data, where phone lines have been replaced by gigabytes, and where the concerns of the public—writ large and made increasingly global—are displayed in searchable form on increasingly sophisticated screens, the assumption that elite tastemakers control opinions is more and more contested by those once assumed to be outsiders.

We do not mean to suggest that the study of rhetoric in the post-Enlightenment and modernist eras disappeared altogether (or that it is a uniquely Western phenomenon), but only that its significance was relegated to the margins of serious Western intellectual thought. Indeed, it was not infrequently referred to as the “Harlot of the Arts.” In this context, rhetorical theorists managed to preserve some academic status for their study by conceding to a secondary or derivative role, allowing rhetoric to be cast in the role of “supplement” or “handmaiden” to more authentic modes of inquiry. The primary concession here was that rhetoric existed apart from the categories of “truth” and “knowledge,” whose proper intellectual domains were science and philosophy. Once one properly discovered “truth” or “knowledge,” rhetoricians might help to “dress it up” so as to communicate it more effectively to a larger, more common audience; but, importantly, it was believed that rhetoric played *no* role in the actual process of discovering such “truth” or “knowledge.”

At the same time that rhetoric was seen as a useful supplement to the work of science and philosophy, it was also deprecated for its role in the realm of “public debate,” where “truth” and “knowledge” were allegedly subordinated to the self-interested ideology of political actors. Since public rhetoric was always oriented toward the particular, and thus generated no universal or timeless truths, its study was typically of marginal interest to serious scholars, who preferred to devote their efforts to the exploration and explanation of the putative, universal beauties of art or the enduring truths of science and philosophy. Of course there were notable exceptions, but they were relatively few and far between, and on the whole the study of rhetoric in the Enlightenment and modernist eras was generally subordinated to the study of science and philosophy.

The classical assumptions about the nature and function of rhetoric that we detail above continue to be important to those who study communication from a rhetorical perspective. However, their significance has been modified by the subsequent history of rhetoric and the distinctive dialogue that has taken place in the recent past. Our primary purpose in this volume is to introduce the most recent, significant discussions and debates about contemporary rhetorical theory as they function to extend, problematize, and move beyond these assumptions. Before we proceed, however, it is important that we qualify our particular understanding of the phrase “contemporary rhetorical theory.”

To identify that which is contemporary is never a simple task. The word itself usually distinguishes those things that are “current” or “marked by characteristics of the present period.”³ In the present context, we use it to refer to the problems of rhetorical theory currently being discussed by scholars; however, we do not mean to include everyone who is presently writing about rhetorical theory in our definition. In the twentieth century, the study of rhetorical theory has generally operated within the domain of scholars in the discipline of communication studies (sometimes referred to as “speech” or “speech communication”). In recent years, however, there has been an explosion of interest in the study of rhetoric, and an increasing number of scholars from disciplines such as English and composition, philosophy and critical/cultural studies, economics, law, political science, and social psychology currently identify themselves as “rhetoricians.”⁴ The work being produced by these scholars is interesting and important—particularly given the historical marginalization of rhetoric within the academy—and it is frequently cited and cross-referenced by rhetoricians operating out of communication studies. However, such work is also frequently motivated by interests and concerns generated by the home discipline with which it is affiliated. Our interest here is threefold: the community of rhetorical theorists who share an identifiable disciplinary history; the way this community has generated a distinctive set of issues and concerns, starting with the common assumption that public communication matters; and finally the way in which this community has responded to larger questions—cultural, political, philosophical, and so on—in ways that are distinct and important.

What then is “contemporary rhetorical theory” as we delineate it in this volume? It is a series of

problems addressed by the community of rhetoricians operating from within the discipline of communication studies since approximately the mid-1960s. As with all communities, the community of contemporary rhetorical scholars is defined and located by the discourse that has generated it. In this case, the generative discourse is not only a particular interpretation of the classical rhetorical tradition, but also the important work of a group of scholars and teachers who effected the revival of classical rhetoric in the early part of the twentieth century as they contributed to the institutionalization of communication studies as an academic discipline. In order to grasp and engage what is distinctive about contemporary rhetorical theory as we define it here, we need an understanding of its origins within twentieth-century communication studies, as well as the initial efforts to transform its study. That task is the function of the next section of this introduction.

The Rebirth of Rhetoric in Twentieth-Century Communication Studies

What today we call “communication studies” emerged as a formal discipline of study in the United States during the early part of the twentieth century and in the specific context of Progressive-era politics. Faced with the nation’s imminent transformation into a mass democratic society, forward-looking intellectuals and educators like John Dewey were concerned about the ability of the citizenry to participate effectively in this new world and thus sought to alter the public education system accordingly. “Public speaking” was seen as essential to being an effective citizen, and thus became the central focus of the new discipline. Consequently, the initial study of rhetorical theory within twentieth-century communication studies focused on the historical examination of classical and civic humanist models of persuasion and governance. Such study served a dual function. On the one hand, it bestowed scholarly legitimacy on the new discipline by demonstrating its ancient and historical roots in the writings of respected philosophers and scholars such as Plato, Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Longinus, Saint Augustine, and others. On the other hand, and perhaps more important to the subsequent development of the new discipline, the philosophical and technical treatises concerning rhetoric that had been written from classical

antiquity through the Renaissance and well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries served as sources of effective strategies for teaching the art of rhetoric to college students.⁵

There is little wonder, therefore, that Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as the faculty or power "of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion" was so influential in shaping the emerging discipline's perception of both the meaning of "rhetoric" as a strategic art and the meaning of "rhetorical theory" as a history of the philosophy of communication.⁶ And indeed, for nearly forty years—from the 1920s through the 1960s—rhetorical theory was treated largely as an exercise in intellectual history. At the same time, the creation of new rhetorical theory was subordinated to the pedagogical goal of creating effective speakers along the lines of fairly classical models represented most fully by Quintilian's *vir bonus*, "the good man speaking well."

The Seeds of Intellectual Ferment

By the mid- to late 1960s, dissatisfaction with this approach to rhetoric began to grow. It became increasingly clear that however important the intellectual history of rhetorical theory was to our understanding of rhetoric as a discipline, the pressing need was to develop "new" rhetorical theories that would adapt our understanding of rhetoric to the changing conditions of the new era. Two independent but not unrelated phenomena were of particular importance in generating the need for such theories. The first phenomenon was the meteoric rise of television as a primary mass medium of public discourse. Television not only altered the ways in which public discourse was conducted, but it began to call increasing attention to the problem of what it might mean to be a "public," as well as to the problem of how public discourse was received and interpreted by the mass and multiple audiences that attended to it.⁷ As we will see subsequently, these problems have been translated into a number of significant questions that have occupied the attention of contemporary rhetorical theorists. The second phenomenon was the emergence of significant grassroots social movements such as the civil rights movement, the student/antiwar movement, and the woman's liberation movement, all of which began to question the effectiveness of classical models of rhetoric and communication for the increasingly vocal, oppositional, and marginalized groups concerned

to infiltrate and overturn what they perceived as rigid social and political hierarchies and hegemonies.⁸

The change that came about was relatively pronounced and immediate, as such things go. Between 1967 and 1976, the fundamental focus of rhetorical theory shifted from a concern with intellectual histories and simple, classical models of rhetorical pedagogy, to an eager interest in understanding the relationships between rhetoric and social theory. The initial hints that a change was stirring appeared in two articles published early in 1967. In the first essay, "The Rhetoric of the Streets," Franklin Haiman recognized that "our society today is confronted with a wide range of activities unfamiliar to those accustomed to thinking of protest in terms of a Faneuil Hall rally or a Bughouse Square soapbox orator." Accordingly, Haiman issued an impassioned call for careful consideration of the ethical and legal standards by which we interpret and evaluate "the contemporary rhetoric of the streets."⁹ Responding to the same spirit of the times, Robert L. Scott offered a more philosophical challenge to our understanding of the substance and sociopolitical significance of rhetoric in "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic."¹⁰ In this essay, which was the starting point of significant debates in the 1970s and 1980s on the role of rhetoric in the construction of truth, Scott argued that rhetoric is not simply a means of making the truth effective, but is quite literally a way of knowing, a means for the production of truth and knowledge in a world where certainty is rare and yet action must be taken. He thereby instigated the repudiation of the secondary status that had been assigned to rhetoric and which had been largely integrated into the assumptions of those who had refounded rhetoric in the twentieth century.

These two essays provided new perspectives on two of the major issues upon which this volume focuses: the question of what constitutes a public (Part IV), and the important and puzzling relationship of rhetoric to matters of epistemology (Part II). The following year, two additional essays by Lloyd F. Bitzer and Douglas Ehninger continued to push in the direction of examining and accounting for the broader social dimensions of rhetoric. Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation," one of the most often cited essays in speech communication journals in the 1970s and 1980s, argued for rhetoric's status as a practical discipline by calling attention to the ways in which discourse that is rhetorical is "called into being" as a result of the

relationship among three constituent elements: “exigences,” “audiences,” and “constraints.”¹¹ Exigences consisted of the events and social relationships that seemed to call for some sort of interpretation. Audiences were those persons who were positioned to respond to the events in productive ways. Constraints were those things that limited the possible ways in which a rhetor could propose a response to the event. In Bitzer’s words, the rhetorical situation was defined as “a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence.” By locating the essence of rhetoric in the broader social situation rather than in the intent of the speaker, Bitzer posed a third critical issue for contemporary rhetorical theorists (Part III): To what extent is rhetoric bound to its context, and what is a context anyway? In “On Systems of Rhetoric,” another much-cited essay of the ensuing decades, Ehninger seconded Bitzer’s position in a more macroscopic way when he argued that rhetoric was a function of its culture, and thus encouraged increased attention to the multiple forms and functions of rhetorics at different times and in different places.¹²

Similar themes were being picked up by any number of other critics and theorists writing in the period. Between 1967 and 1970, several important essays on social movements were published.¹³ Collectively, they raised the fourth theoretical problem addressed in this volume (Part VI): What is the relationship between rhetoric and issues of political change? These essays also had a broader impact, shifting the attention of rhetorical studies so as to address the key problems and concerns of twentieth-century social and political theory. The implications of this work began to crystallize formally at two conferences sponsored by the National Developmental Project on Rhetoric (NDPR) in 1970 and reported in an important volume edited by Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black titled *The Prospect of Rhetoric*.¹⁴

In the words of the founders of the NDPR, “[Its] central objective was to outline and amplify a theory of rhetoric suitable to twentieth-century concepts and needs.”¹⁵ The debates and discussions at the Wingspread Conference in January 1970, and the National Conference on Rhetoric later in May, were spirited and often heated. In the end, however, the conferees, consisting of over forty of the leading male scholars in rhetorical stud-

ies, combined to offer recommendations on the advancement and refinement of rhetorical criticism, the scope of rhetoric and the place of rhetorical studies in higher education, and the nature of rhetorical invention.¹⁶ It is interesting to read the specific recommendations generated in each of these areas, to get a portrait of the particular issues of the times and to see how the general culture of the 1960s affected the conception of rhetoric that was developing (and thus implicitly endorsing Ehninger’s suggestion that rhetorics were functions of the particular and localized cultures in which they emerged). For our purposes, however, what is even more striking and important is the “consensus judgment” that was arrived at regarding the outline of a satisfactory contemporary theory of rhetoric. It consisted of four specific recommendations:

1. The technology of the twentieth century has created so many new channels and techniques of communication, and the problems confronting contemporary societies are so related to communicative methods and contents, that it is imperative that rhetorical studies be broadened to explore communicative procedures and practices not traditionally covered.
2. Our recognition of the scope of rhetorical theory and practice should be greatly widened.
3. At the same time, a clarified and expanded concept of reason and rational decision should be worked out.
4. Rhetorical invention should be restored to a position of centrality in theory and practice.¹⁷

Although these recommendations were very general, they clearly resonated with the sense that rhetoric was not merely the art of teaching public speaking, but rather that to be rhetorical was a central and substantial dimension of many facets of the human social experience. To borrow a phrase that Simons would later coin to describe the increasing interest in rhetoric within the academy as a whole, “the rhetorical turn” was about to be taken in a most thorough-going fashion; no longer, at least among rhetoricians, would rhetoric be presumed as a mere supplement or “handmaiden” to philosophy, sociology, history, or English. Instead, it would constitute its own significant perspective on the problems and possibilities of life-in-society. As such, the commitment to the production and performance of rhetorical theory, rather than simply the study of the history of rhetorical theory, became a central part of rhetorical studies.

“Rhetoric” Comes of Age (Again) in the “Post-” Era

It took several years for the full implications of the findings of the NDPR to be completely understood, for the impact was quite literally to call into question and revise the assumptions undergirding our understanding of rhetoric as a fundamental, social human phenomenon. But more than that, it also had implications for how we think about the relationships between theory, criticism, and practice. Only Barry Brummett, at the time a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, began to talk in terms of a “postmodern rhetoric.”¹⁸ However, the seeds for the contemporary debate between modernism and postmodernism were sown here. And while there have been claims in recent years that “postmodernism is dead,” any attempt to suggest an alternative—“post-postmodernism,” “pseudomodernism,” and “metamodernism” have been offered as alternatives—have failed to gain traction in communication studies. More accurately, then, we assert that postmodernism has grown to include additional concerns (such as the importance of the visual and performative) while also integrating newer approaches (postcolonial and critical) into its canon. At the same time, the history of emergent theoretical orientations—for instance, the psychoanalytical (post-)Marxism of Slavoj Žižek—are still being written. Thus, while much has changed in the years since the first edition of this book was published, the focus on the divide between modernism and postmodernism remains relevant and instructive.

The differences between modernist and postmodernist perspectives have been the focus of significant and productive debates between and among rhetorical theorists in recent years as they have addressed the specific concerns of rhetorical study, and there is every reason to believe that such debates will continue well into the twenty-first century. You will see various facets of these debates emerge in each of the eight parts of this volume as particular problems and issues are addressed. Modernism features a commitment to scientism, and to objective, morally neutral, universal knowledge.¹⁹ In the modern worldview, the universe is a relatively simple, stable, highly ordered place, describable in and reducible to absolute formulae that hold across contexts. Disagreement, in such a worldview, is treated as an unnecessary pathology that arises primarily from ignorance and irrationality. The solution or cure

for social discord therefore lies in greater research, less passion, more rationality, and more education.

By contrast, postmodernism prefers interpretation over scientific study because it operates with the assumption that all knowledge is subjective and/or intersubjective, morally culpable, and local. In the postmodern worldview, the universe is a rapidly changing, highly complex entity. From this perspective, universally applicable formulae or “covering laws” designed for the purposes of describing and controlling the world are of minimal use, for the multiple and competing factors operating in every context override even the possibility of formulaic understanding. Each situation must be addressed in its own, and often chaotic, particularity. Disagreement is thus considered a rather “natural” result of different social, political, and ethnic groups, with different logics, interests, and values, living together and competing for limited or scarce resources. In this view, struggle, not consensus, is the defining characteristic of social life; accordingly, social discord is not a pathology to be cured, but a condition to be productively managed.

The first inklings of the tensions that would be generated by these dramatically conflicting worldviews began to emerge in a published debate in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in 1972 concerning critical assessments of President Richard Nixon’s November 3, 1969, speech to the nation on the war in Vietnam. Forbes Hill employed a neo-Aristotelian perspective to evaluate Nixon’s speech.²⁰ Neo-Aristotelianism was a method of rhetorical criticism heavily influenced by modernist notions of objectivity and the moral neutrality of the critic. Its primary goal was to evaluate a speech in terms of the degree to which it employed what Aristotle referred to as “the available means of persuasion” in attempting to achieve its goal. To the degree that a speech employed all of the means available to it, it was judged to be a good speech; to the degree that it failed to employ all such means, it was correspondingly a bad speech. Importantly, the critic was to maintain objective distance from the critical object, and thus there was no space in neo-Aristotelian criticism for evaluating the morality of particular choices or the ultimate outcome of the speech. According to Hill, Nixon’s speech employed all of the available means of persuasion, and thus he judged it to be a good speech.

In the Forum that followed Hill’s essay, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell called both the method of neo-Aristotelianism and the substance of Hill’s par-

ticular conclusions into question.²¹ The key point of her argument was that, appearances to the contrary, Hill's reliance upon an allegedly "objective" and "morally neutral" critical perspective was ultimately neither. More importantly, she argued, Hill actively ignored the important intellectual responsibility of situating his analysis as a morally culpable, theoretical practice.

Though many at the time concluded that Kohrs Campbell had made the more compelling argument, the truly significant, albeit implicit, claim this dispute evidenced was the clear need to (re) negotiate the relationship between critical and theoretical concerns. Modernist approaches to criticism and theory that presupposed the application of neutral and objective criteria to speeches (or other communication events) as a means of judging them would no longer suffice as a means of theorizing the rhetorical. Put differently, it was becoming increasingly clear that rhetoric was not a practice that culminated in "the amassing of objective knowledge or the generation of purely abstract theory," but was rather a "performance" that needed to be interpreted and evaluated in particular, interested, local contexts.²² Rejecting the rigid modernist spirit of positivism and scientism in rhetorical studies proved to be relatively easy. Determining specifically what ought to replace it has been a much more difficult problem, and trying to solve that problem has been an issue that the discipline has visited over and over again in the subsequent twenty-five years. Indeed, it is a problem that pervades many of the essays included in this volume.

Among the most important sets of stimuli for the search to replace the spirit of modernism in this period of ferment were the issues raised by the burgeoning woman's movement. In 1973, Kohrs Campbell published "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron" in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.²³ In this essay, she argued that classical rhetorical theories failed to provide an appropriate or useful guide for the type of rhetoric that shaped women's liberation. From the perspective of classical rhetoric, she suggested, women's liberation was an oxymoron. It could not succeed because it could not appeal to audiences steeped in traditionally gendered norms; in addition, it employed alternative strategies such as small-group "consciousness raising" rather than the more traditional public platform as a means of effecting persuasion. Following Kohrs Campbell's lead, a variety of scholars have continued to explore

feminist issues such as the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, and women's roles, forging new critical tools from new theoretical perspectives. These inquiries have included a questioning of both the substantive and the stylistic formulae for theory construction.²⁴ There is little agreement today on what constitutes a feminist rhetorical theory, but this body of theoretical work continually exerts pressure for broader perspectives to be taken upon the general theories of rhetoric that are most widely circulated, and this debt of the center to the margins has not been acknowledged very widely.²⁵ Kohrs Campbell's work is thus important not only because it offered an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship between rhetoric and political change (Part VI), but also because it helped to spur work on the relationship between rhetoric and traditionally marginalized groups (as considered in Part VIII).

The renewal of rhetoric as a theoretical discipline that began around 1967 culminated in scholarly work done nearly a decade later. This period of scholarly growth was important not only because it embodied the renewed emphasis on rhetorical theories as a means for understanding contemporary social and political life, but also because it encouraged increased contact and conversation with the emergence (in translation) of a growing community of continental social theorists who were beginning to focus attention on discourse and communication theory. One such example, published in 1976, was Thomas Farrell's "Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory" (Part II). Farrell sought to recover and reconstruct Aristotle's commitment to the combination of "[an] art of rhetoric and a generally accepted body of knowledge pertaining to matters of public concern."²⁶ Reading Aristotle into and through the context of American pragmatism, and drawing upon the increasingly elaborate social theory of Jürgen Habermas, Farrell developed a conception of "social knowledge" that stood in contrast to "technical knowledge." He then elaborated the functional characteristics of social knowledge, identifying it as consensual, audience-dependent, generative, and normative. Farrell underscored the need to rethink the ways in which we understand and employ the key components of the rhetorical process. He thus emphasized the importance of bringing classical rhetorical perspectives (Aristotle) into dialogue with contemporary U.S. philosophical perspectives (e.g., pragmatism), as well as continental philosophy and social theory (e.g.,

Habermas's revision of Marxist critical theory). In Farrell's own work, this expansion was reflected in a broadened definition of rhetoric as "a collaborative manner of engaging others through discourse so that contingencies may be resolved, judgments rendered, action produced."²⁷

After work like this, there was simply no turning back. Rhetorical studies had become substantively theoretical in its focus. The positions and perspectives of Farrell and others, such as the influential scholar Michael Calvin McGee, would come under attack, to be sure. But such efforts were framed by the theoretical projects of the mid-1970s, the culmination of the work of the previous ten years. Whereas previously theory, criticism, and history stood as starkly different dimensions of rhetorical studies, henceforth they would become increasingly implicated in and by one another (by some accounts oppressively so).²⁸

Plan of the Volume

The essays in this volume mark the course and development of rhetorical theory from 1967 to the present, though we present it less as a history (for which it would be altogether incomplete and inadequate) and more as an indication of the range of specific questions, problems, issues, and approaches that have occupied contemporary American rhetorical theorists in this period and continue to occupy them today. Indeed, in an important sense we offer the volume as an invitation to beginning scholars to become part of the community and the dialogue constituted by the essays and voices that are contained herein. The volume begins with a section titled "What Can a 'Rhetoric' Be?" and ends with a section titled "Alternatives to the Rhetorical Tradition." The opening section demonstrates that even though there are overlapping assumptions within the mainstream about what rhetoric might be, there is no univocal consensus on how we should understand it. The closing section underscores and emphasizes the interplay between those operating inside and outside the mainstream. The productive results of this interaction are obvious. Scholars are actively and productively critiquing and contesting established assumptions in ways that make rhetorical studies a vital and variable, though also very contentious, field of study and action.

The remaining six parts identify the major problems and issues that have occupied contemporary rhetorical theorists in recent years, and provide a

range of voices and approaches on each one. We cannot possibly provide comprehensive coverage on each topic, so we have included a brief list of additional readings in each area. Part II addresses the rhetoric and epistemology debates. We position this section early because it represents one of the most enduring debates in the period covered here, and because the position one takes on the epistemological status of rhetoric will have much to say about the stance one takes as a rhetorical theorist.

Part III examines the continuing relevance of the rhetorical situation. Contemporary rhetorical theorists have conceded Bitzer's general claim that rhetoric and discourse are in some sense inherently and historically situated, rather than timeless and universal. This position challenges some of the bedrock assumptions underlying continental discourse theories. However, even within American rhetorical theory, there is no consensus on what we mean when we say that rhetoric is "situated." The essays included in this section indicate three different ways in which we might understand context, and a further argument that we might need to move beyond the situation in light of newer methods of discourse dissemination.

Part IV focuses on the complex and contested conceptions of "publics." Throughout much of the twentieth century, this concept was treated as an uncomplicated abstraction; rhetors addressed publics, and publics responded to rhetors. Over the past fifty years, scholars have begun to conceptualize the publics to which rhetoric is addressed in novel and diverse ways. An underlying concern is how the nature of the rhetorical address shapes—and, in some cases, transforms—public responses to political and social controversies. The essays in this section vary in their responses to this concern, ranging from considerations of form (e.g., narrative or visual) to questions of conceptualization (with frames that range from the *polis* to concerns about counterpublics).

Part V directs attention to the notion of "personae" in rhetorical theory. In many respects, this is the key issue confronting rhetorical theory, particularly in the context of continued efforts to engage the relationship among rhetorical, cultural, and critical studies. Just as rhetoricians agree that rhetoric is somehow situated, so too they agree that every rhetoric is always in some ways addressed to some audience that it seeks to influence or persuade. The points of controversy lie in where and how we identify that audience. What is its status within the rhetorical process? Who is

included? Who is left out? What choices do rhetors make in addressing some and not others? What options are open to those who are addressed and those who are silenced? These issues implicate the authorization of social or public knowledge, and/or the construction of social and political identity. The essays in this section engage these questions in contentious and provocative ways.

Part VI considers the broad relationship between rhetoric and politics. There are many ways in which such a section could be organized. We have chosen a twofold path. On the one hand, we explore the range of concerns raised when different types of social groupings—including the electoral politics of the nation-state, the organized social movement, and the identity group—are taken as the unit of analysis. On the other, we consider how a particular theoretical stance on the relationship between rhetoric and political change—Marxist, for instance—might influence our thinking. These essays provide original and telling glimpses into the varying roles of rhetoric in social change in disparate circumstances.

Part VII concerns the relationship between rhetoric and the mass media. Rhetoric, of course, was a technology invented in the fifth century B.C.E. as a means of wielding power and influence. Since that time, subsequent technological innovations from the printing press to radio to digital communications have had significant and sometimes revolutionary effects upon the ways in which the rhetorical impulse is experienced and understood. The essays included in this section address this problem in the contemporary context of the mass media: television, film, cyberspace, and beyond. They call attention both to how rhetorical theory might help us better understand the social, political, and cultural significance of these media of social interaction, and to how these media direct and influence the ways in which we might think of rhetorical theory in a mass-mediated era.

Collectively, the essays in this volume represent some of the most important contributions of contemporary rhetorical theory to the larger academic discussions concerning the social and political implications of discourse. Since the mid-1960s, the academic discussion on the importance and role of discourse has framed major intellectual currents in a wide range of traditional disciplines, from anthropology, English, and history to sociology and political science. It has also been a significant, animating factor in the more recent rise of more discrete academic areas: cultural, critical, gender, and sexuality studies. We (tentatively) address the

specific contributions of rhetorical studies to this larger academic conversation, at times complementary and at others contentious, in the Epilogue. We hope that after you engage the essays in this volume, you will begin to gain a sense of what rhetorical theory has been in the contemporary period—and, more importantly, of the future contributions it might make. And in that context, it is our hope that the Epilogue may actually function as the prologue to the future studies that you will produce.

To understand ourselves and the societies we create with our words is a challenging and daunting task, but we are inexorably committed to the belief that it is the richest and most rewarding of endeavors available. We offer the essays collected in this volume both as the evidence of and as contributions to that ongoing project.

NOTES

1. Isocrates, “Antidosis,” in *Isocrates*, trans. George Norlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), vol. 2, 253–55. For an important discussion of the importance of Isocrates to the rhetorical tradition, see Takis Poulakos, *Isocrates’ Rhetorical Education* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

2. There are numerous and quite good surveys of the history of rhetoric. The most readily available ones still in print include Thomas Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); George A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetorics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1988). A very good survey that includes major excerpts from significant theoretical texts is Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, eds., *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford-St. Martin’s, 1990). A slightly dated, but nonetheless very useful, collection of bibliographical review essays on the history of rhetoric are contained in Winifred Bryan Horner, ed., *The Present State of Scholarship in Historical and Contemporary Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990).

3. Merriam-Webster’s *Tenth Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “contemporary.”

4. Representative examples of such work include Michael Billig, *Ideology and Opinions: Studies in Rhetorical Psychology* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991); Donald N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); James Boyd

White, *Heracles' Bow: Essays on the Rhetoric and Poetics of the Law* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); and John S. Nelson, *Tropes of Politics: Science, Theory, Rhetoric, Action* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). Two useful collections of essays include John Bender and David E. Wellbery, eds., *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); and John S. Nelson et al., eds., *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

5. The full history of the development of rhetorical theory in the discipline of communication studies has yet to be written. An important initial effort that emphasizes the early years in particular is Michael Leff and Margaret Organ Procaro, "Rhetorical Theory in Speech Communication," in Thomas W. Benson, ed., *Speech Communication in the Twentieth Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 3–27.

6. Aristotle, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, 1355b26, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 7.

7. See Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speech-making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

8. John W. Bowers and Donovan J. Ochs, *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1971).

9. Franklin Haiman, "The Rhetoric of the Streets: Legal and Ethical Considerations," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 53 (1967): 99, 114.

10. Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," *Central States Speech Journal* 18 (1967): 9–16.

11. Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1–14.

12. Douglas Ehninger, "On Systems of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 131–44.

13. See Michael Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light–Dark Family," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 53 (1967): 115–26; Parke G. Burgess, "The Rhetoric of Black Power: A Moral Demand?," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 54 (1968): 122–33, and "The Rhetoric of Moral Conflict: Two Critical Dimensions," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 120–30; Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 55 (1969): 9–16; Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 109–19; Walter R. Fisher, "A Motive View of Communication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 54 (1970): 131–39; and Herbert W. Simons, "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 1–11.

14. The conferences were organized by the National Developmental Project on Rhetoric (NDPR), and sponsored by the Speech Communication Association and

the National Endowment for the Humanities. See Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, eds., *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Developmental Project* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971). The essays that constituted this volume were reexamined in light of more recent developments in Mark Porrovecchio, ed., *Reengaging the Prospects of Rhetoric: Current Conversations and Contemporary Challenges* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010).

15. Bitzer and Black, *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, v.

16. It is important to note that among the forty-plus rhetoricians invited to the conferences, there were no women. This might be accounted for, in part, by the dearth of women rhetoricians publishing in this time period. The notable omission of Marie Hochmuth Nichols—who had just completed a term as the editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*; who had edited the third volume of the then important *History and Criticism of Public Address*; and who had published as well an important collection of lectures on the development of a "new rhetoric," *Rhetoric and Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963)—is nonetheless somewhat odd. For one account, see Gerard Hauser, review of Theresa Enos, ed., *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997): 243–46. The history of these conferences has been discussed in some detail. See, e.g., Theresa Enos and Richard McNabb, eds., *Making and Unmaking the Prospects of Rhetoric* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997).

17. Bitzer and Black, *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, 238–39.

18. Barry Brummett, "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 9 (1976): 21–51.

19. The tension between modernism and postmodernism, and all the attendant offshoots thereof, involves complex and often conflicting narratives. We cannot hope even to begin to unpack or resolve these issues in a few short pages. A well-established body of work focuses on the debates concerning the meaning of and relationships between the conditions of modernity and postmodernity, and the philosophical positions of modernism and postmodernism. Useful introduction to the relevant issues are found in David Lyons, *Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); and Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002). For more complex, historically situated considerations of the relationships, one might look to David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2000) or to Barry Smart, *Modern Conditions, Postmodern Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Those interested in charting the tensions and debates through what many consider to be the primary texts of modernism and postmodernism might look to Lawrence Cahoone, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology Expanded* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

20. Forbes Hill, "Conventional Wisdom—Traditional Form—The President's Message of November 3, 1969," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 373–86.

21. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "'Conventional Wisdom—Traditional Form': A Rejoinder," and Forbes Hill, "A Response to Professor Campbell," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 452–60.

22. Leff and Procaro, "Rhetorical Theory," 5.

23. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 74–86.

24. For a provocative example of this line of theorizing, see Jane Sutton, "The Taming of *Polos/Polis*: Rhetoric as an Achievement Without Woman," *Southern Communication Journal* 57 (1992): 97–119.

25. For a description of feminist research in rhetorical studies in this period, see Celeste Michelle Condit, "Opposites in an Oppositional Practice: Rhetorical Criticism and Feminism," in Sheryl Perlmutter Bowen and Nancy Wyatt, eds., *Transforming Visions: Feminist Critiques in Communication Studies* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1993), 205–30.

26. Thomas Farrell, "Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 1. The other signal essay of this period was published a year earlier by an equally influential scholar: Michael C. McGee, "In Search of 'the People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975): 235–49. McGee argued that the premiere challenge facing the discipline was to recognize the significance of rhetoric as central to the constitution of collective life, not merely a matter of teaching speeches or observing their immediate effects on audiences. His point, complementing the work of Farrell, was that rhetorical theory that took itself seriously would draw critically upon concrete instances of persuasive discourse.

27. Thomas Farrell, "From the Parthenon to the Bassinet: Along the Epistemic Trail," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990): 83. For the fullest development of Farrell's perspective, see his *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

28. See James Darsey, "Must We All Be Rhetorical Theorists?: An Anti-Democratic Inquiry," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 58 (1994): 164–81.