

Activism and Rhetoric

Theories and Contexts for Political Engagement

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First published 2010

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-50170-6 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-50171-3 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-315-14453-5 (ebk)

Chapter 13

Speaking the Power of Truth

Rhetoric and Action for Our Times

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13 Speaking the Power of Truth

Rhetoric and Action for Our Times

Lee Artz

News about fake news is fake news. It is a maneuver by media pundits and political operatives to distract the public from the very real fake history that they are peddling. Indeed, power largely depends on fake history for public support. The United States sent 500,000 Americans to war on Vietnam, killing hundreds of thousands, in part, justified by a Vietnamese Gulf of Tonkin attack that never happened. In the 1980s, the United States directed a contra war against the democratically elected Nicaraguan government under the fear of Soviet military expansion that did not exist. The US rallied support for invading Iraq in 1990, falsely claiming that Iraqi soldiers killed “incubator babies” in Kuwait. Clinton blockaded Iraq, killing more than 500,000 children, claiming a threat that did not exist. The United States brought “shock and awe” to Iraq again in 2003 ostensibly to preempt “weapons of mass destruction” that did not exist. Obama launched weekly drone attacks around the Middle East, killing hundreds of civilians, against imagined threats. Pointing to fake dangers to public safety and jobs, Obama and Trump deported hundreds of thousands. In each case, and always, power knows the truth. Corporate and government power continually make feeble attempts to obscure facts and distract the public from the very real conditions of inequality, racism, and war. Their rhetorical appeals based on lies temporarily act to confuse and disorient many. At the same time, inequality is so severe and the disparity in resources for communicating so profound that rhetoric for social justice seldom appears in the mass media.

Under the real conditions of unequal access to communication, rhetorical constructions by government officials are almost universally distributed over the airwaves, by the daily press, and even on social media. Post-truth has become the new norm. In this context, there is no meaningful democratic public debate or discourse. Democracy as a political goal and social process has been trashed by media agenda setting, media framing, and myriad public relations, news, and fake news operations organized by government agencies. The ideal speech situation, the democratic sphere, imagined by rhetorical theorists can only be realized within and among democratic social movements that challenge existing power—not by speaking truth to that power—but by speaking

the power of our new truth: we are the majority, we must collectively argue, debate, and decide how to save humanity. Conditions of life for millions of world citizens in the 21st century indicate that for democracy to exist, the economic and political power of corporate capitalism must be replaced with a just society. Rhetorical appeals are needed that can organize actions for social justice, yet argument, discussion, and even investigations cannot occur freely in the contemporary world capitalism order.

History attests that established power seldom is moved by what is rational, good, or ideal for humanity. Yet, resisting and replacing illegitimate power cannot be reduced to punching a Nazi. Lone anarchist attacks on racists and right-wing nationalists do not educate, persuade, organize, or mobilize the millions of citizens needed for social change. The rhetorical effect of antifa bravado echoes superhero movies that counsel citizen inaction and reliance on individual heroes. While the majority of young adults reject capitalism, many may even applaud the dramatic display of antiracism, but remain politically inactive, seduced by the two capitalist political parties and concerned with their own consumerist needs. The relationship between rhetoric and action, and the true power of democracy, appears more pragmatically and theoretically effective in the August 2017 mass demonstration against white supremacy in Boston that sent the handful of neo-fascists scurrying in the face of organized democratic power. In San Francisco, the public call by Local 10 of the International Longshore Workers Association for area unions, workers, and citizens to join their protest led the “patriotic” racists to cancel their march. Likewise, the mass response to the killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Trayvon Martin, and hundreds of other victims of racist police violence, has launched a national movement against racist practices, celebrations, and monuments. The rhetorical appeal of each of these mass actions trumpets engagement, dialog, action by the democratic majority. Such actions rhetorically inspire many to more actions and organized democratic power, while symbolically highlighting the socioeconomic, geographic, racial, and other conditions of class inequality. In collective actions, the truth of our power becomes more apparent. Meanwhile, continued fake news and well-crafted public relations campaigns attempt to legitimize and reinforce the current social order, obscuring social class difference, including all of its gender, ethnic, racial, and class contradictions. The question for those intent on defending the social order and for those seeking social justice is how their persuasive appeals affect social and political action.

Most theoreticians and practitioners of rhetoric and social activism accept that rhetoric is a “rationale of instrumental and symbolic action” (Bowers and Ochs 1) crucial for initiating and motivating human action. Unfortunately, prevalent discourse theory (Mumby) and contemporary liberal reform groups (e.g., www.MoveOn.org; www.indivisibleguide.com) accept existing social relations and social structures in need of new leadership or minor reform. Their rhetorical appeals reflect as much and reinforce the very conditions of

inequality they tepidly address. My experience in antiwar movements, civil rights campaigns, labor struggles, and international solidarity actions prompts a different emphasis that rejects speaking truth to power, one that recognizes capitalist class relations in all of their contradictory effects, one that seeks the power of truth mobilized by the democratic majority.

One basic assumption notes that persuasion depends on an attentive audience response, but what conditions allow for audience reception or even recognition of an appeal? Rhetorical exigencies, urgent social problems, trigger calls for possible solutions (Bitzer). But what makes a problem more or less urgent? Not the rhetorical appeal by itself. It must conform to the needs and interests of the audience, filtered through existing social norms and cultural values. Publics come to each rhetorical situation with pre-existing interests and needs as they understand them. Interests and needs always have prior impulses informed by prior rhetorical appeals and cultural beliefs. Still, no matter how they have been cultivated, interests and needs always arise from the sociopolitical conditions being lived at the historic moment of crisis.

This may be dismissed by those who do not accept material reality, but I suggest that whether any rhetoric can prompt social action depends in large part on how well it addresses the sociopolitical conditions of those involved. Social action arises in response to rhetorical appeals that address the life experiences of those affected, life experiences that occur individually, but in the aggregate depend on social relations, social position, and social power. Peer groups, social interactions, expectations, understandings, skills, aptitudes, tastes, and other characteristics and proclivities, result from the concrete historical conditions of one's life. We benefit or suffer from our social class position: we speak Spanish, Chinese, or English depending on our upbringing; we are well educated or not depending on our families and neighborhoods; police harass or defer to us depending on our social class and apparent racial identities. In short, the cogency of an exigence and the possible response to any rhetorical appeal are first and foremost framed by one's relation to the condition and the proposed solution—relations dependent on the larger social order that precedes our individual recognition. We are born into conditions not of our own making; we cultivate ourselves in the existing social relations; we interactively are socialized into the mores, norms, and practices that cradle our existence. Available resources, including language, material culture, social interests, and their relations frame and inform whatever specific, historically contingent social order we enter. Thus, the response to any condition of life may range from a dramatically pressing exigence, to a minor irritation, to complete unawareness—depending on one's social position and development.

While once-in-a-century hurricanes may threaten the lives of all in their path, the aftermath presents radically different exigencies. For many, survival is a daily question; for others with more resources, relocation is a realistic option; and for a few, extreme profits can be made from rebuilding after the disaster to others. The executive order by Obama to deport immigrant children

from Honduras and the Trump threat to dismantle the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals that allows immigrant children to postpone deportation and apply for work permits have different exigencies, pose a different problem, depending on one's social position. Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Perdue Chicken, and GOP or Democratic operatives are affected differently and respond differently to those executive orders than will Homeland Security, anti-immigrant militia in Arizona, undocumented youth, or their high school science teacher. What is the exigence? What action addresses what problem? Will ADM and Perdue raise prices on corn and chicken to defray costs from employment disruption? Will Homeland Security hire more enforcement police? Will neighbors and friends of DACA youth oppose the order and shelter immigrants? Will schools and teachers block government inquiries? The exigence of immigration policy obviously is different for those in different social positions, to those with different economic, political, and ideological interests. The effectiveness of any rhetorical appeal transcends the rational argument, because the exigence itself depends on the social interests of diverse social positions.

What is the "exigence" of a "runaway" slave? This posed a different problem for a banker, slaveholder, sharecropper who witnesses the liberated, the police charged with the capture. . . . For the former slave, the "runaway" is no exigence at all! It is the rational solution to the condition of slavery. A banker, however, considers the loss of chattel wealth a serious problem in need of resolution. Others, neither slave nor master, have less immediate self-interest, but, nonetheless, may be influenced or constrained by the legal, cultural, religious, and other experiential factors responding variously as witnesses, abettors of the Underground Railroad, or legal and social apologists for slavery—loosely paralleling the "habitus" of their social position (Bourdieu). Indeed, many nurtured in the culture of slavery sought to avoid resistance to human bondage out of fear, apathy, and even confusion, as well as those that benefitted from what W.E.B. DuBois called "white skin privilege."

In more contemporary crises, the US invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, of the bombings of Libya and Syria, and drone attacks in all of those countries, plus Pakistan, Syria, and the Sudan, pose different problems for different social classes and national groups—inconsistently reflected in their identification or agreement with a variety of political arguments and actions. For or against US wars, Halliburton and Lockheed shareholders and Hill & Knowlton PR account managers confront a dramatically different set of decisions than a National Guardsmen sent to Kandahar or a college professor, and all of those are radically at odds with the exigencies pummeling citizens being bombarded. The rhetorical situation may appear the same—for or against a US war—but the possible consequential actions entail some extremely unequal behavioral choices. Will Halliburton accountants assist in privatizing Iraq or overcharging the Pentagon? Will Hill & Knowlton interns contribute to propaganda spin? Will the soldier report to duty, shoot, kill, bomb? Will the

professor incorporate the war into a syllabus, speak out at a student forum? Such choices are not equivalent. Undoubtedly, each choice is more or less informed by the same facts and arguments culled from the debate—a debate that occurs under restricted political conditions and is witnessed largely according to one’s social position that both accords or restricts access (to multiple media sources, the Internet, and cultural milieu) and predilection (skill, norms, cultural milieu). Access and preference in knowledge acquisition are only rough indicators of other social differences. Attitudes toward Obama’s drone attacks and US missile attacks on Syria are influenced by persuasive appeals—to the extent that news and information is available and to the extent that rhetorical appeals resonate with one’s cultural and social positions. Citizens (who have already internalized dominant cultural values from two decades of militarization and normalization) evaluate the arguments and claims (that they hear from their reinforcing preferred media) from disparate social positions that afford diverse and contradictory experiences, consciousness, and constraints. Simply put, we might expect that: shareholders seek profits; publicists promote clients; soldiers obey; and professors stick to the curriculum. Each choice is organized by the social order, its structures, practices, and social relations, with some variety depending on individual social positions: soldiers do their duty; professors don’t shout; publicists don’t question a client’s ethics or campaign; the market is god; and patriotism is natural ... unless the exigent crisis is so severe that it disrupts everyday life allowing social movements to disrupt the social relations of power, cultural norms, and ideological justifications.

The ability to receive and perceive rhetorical appeals is based on one’s rhetorical experience, but that rhetorical experience occurs within a culturally defined space at a historically specific time. The language, images, and representations that are most readily understood parallel the experiences of one’s historical condition. Charlotte Beers and the US State Department failed in their PR campaign for Muslim support in the Middle East because no rhetorical trope exists that could shake the visceral, and very real, experience of “shock-and-awe” violence against civilians. Bombing the Middle East convinces more of US intentions than all the lame rhetorical assertions of defending democracy and freedom. Bombs, troops, and drones are more rhetorically convincing than any persuasive leaflet dropped from the same planes that dropped bombs the day before.

Rhetoric will not stop the next hurricane headed for the Atlantic Coast, nor do hurricanes stop for those that don’t believe in climate change. Some social conditions have the same inexorable material properties. Talk will not, by itself, stop war, inequality, oppression, or environmental destruction. Nor will the failure to perceive inequality, injustice, or climate change make them any less real. Rhetoric may enable the privileged to turn away, but for those that suffer the condition remains calling out for concerted action.

This understanding by no means dismisses rhetoric, the classic art of discovering all the means of persuasion. Indeed, a full appreciation of rhetoric

means including “all” the means. Privileging argument without regard to social class puts the world at peril. We must not omit the social relations of power in which and through which all rhetoric must pass. Capitalist hegemony built on popular consent needs us to accept the rhetoric of the marketers: hyper-individualism; narcissism; immediate self-gratification; bottom line profits over social needs; and the corporate model for all decisions—from health care and air quality to class size and curriculum, to “infinity and beyond!” to quote a Disney icon. But in the words of an HBO icon, “winter is coming” for global capitalism.

Activists seeking to save our species, close the hole in the ozone, end US occupations and attacks on countless nations, abolish race discrimination, replace patriarchy, or simply pass a school referendum need a more class-conscious rhetoric. They, *we*, need an effective, history-changing, history-producing rhetoric addressed to and constructed with the participation of working people, the vast democratic majority of the world. The ingredients of this rhetoric for social change and social justice must begin by addressing the conditions of the disenfranchised and the oppressed, fully and truthfully, by stating clearly that overcoming social inequality requires changing the social relations of power by replacing capitalism. Who leads, what political program, what democracy? A rhetoric of social change proposes a working-class leadership that puts people before profits, a political program of solidarity and action with all of the oppressed, and decision-making by and benefits for all of humanity.

In the 21st century, for the first time in history, humanity has the means and resources for feeding all, housing all, playing music for all. Technology for humanity can shorten the work week and the drudgery of work, if it’s democratically directed. Currently, neoliberal globalization—the accumulation of wealth by the dispossession of the many (Harvey), shareholder profits, and government coercion against the majority—prevents the realization of global democracy. A rhetoric that is truly audience-centered, truly reciprocal and democratic would speak to the power of change and to the truth of the majority.

I arrive at this conclusion, not just from study and training—some have even argued that this position is evidence of a lack of scholarly ability. I reach this profound understanding from experience, reflection, and dialog with others, in validation of Paolo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed, with a class consciousness resulting from evidence witnessed by the successes of ongoing social movements for change.

Speaking power to truth is one lesson from my years as a participant and occasional leader of antiwar campaigns on Vietnam, Nicaragua, Iraq, of civil rights efforts for schools and in labor, of struggles for democracy and improved working conditions, and of mass solidarity campaigns for African liberation and in defense of the efforts toward a 21st-century socialism in Venezuela, Bolivian, and Ecuador. I was convinced of the radical perspectives of these movements by the effective rhetoric of others that resonated with my social

position and experience as a working-class youth, a working-class college student in integrated social circles at the peak of civil rights activity and black nationalist organization—from King to Malcolm to the Panthers and Stokely. Friends and collaborators in these efforts articulated well with music, sport, social life, and daily conversations. Before knowing of rhetorical theory, I learned the art of persuasion at cafeteria tables, dorm lounges, local clubs, street corners, and campus debates. The US war in Vietnam affected daily life: family, classmates, childhood friends faced the draft and then the violence. My initial ambivalence was resolved by letters from Kris Blumer, a friend drafted to Vietnam, who wrote of the horror and hypocrisy of the US occupation. Members of the corporate and business classes did not and could not receive such letters, because draftees in their majority were working class and front line troops in their overwhelming majority were working class. Elites like George Bush and Donald Trump received deferments, excuses, officer training. The letters from Kris were persuasive, real not fake news. His letters complemented the rhetorical appeals of the mass antiwar organizations. The ultraleft Students for a Democratic Society (the Black Bloc of the times) faded, as mass, peaceful demonstrations demanding “US Out Now!” represented and recruited the majority of American citizens (Halstead). Experiences conditioned by my social position opened a pathway for antiwar rhetoric; I became a member officer, state and regional leader of the National Peace Action Coalition, responsible for press, public speaking, public debate, organization, and persuasion. As a draft age, draft-eligible, but non-draft-dodging, antiwar working-class youth, my experiences contradicted the accepted claims and news of the war before many others reached those same conclusions. From 1969 to 1971, as the material consequences of Vietnamese resistance disrupted the insularity and confusion of the majority of Americans, leading antiwar rhetoric became convincing because the appeals met the changing conditions of everyday life in the United States.

After graduation, I became a public school teacher in Detroit. I was immediately part of school desegregation conversations and campaigns because my earlier interactions with Black family and friends on race and Vietnam, higher education, and daily life connected well with my everyday classroom experiences and the rhetoric of equality in education, critical pedagogy, school desegregation, and affirmative action. I transitioned from college student and middle school teacher and from leading antiwar actions and battles for school desegregation in Detroit and Boston (Hillson) to become a steelworker and machinist active in labor reform (Nyden). I shared the experiences of many other working-class youth. Although the commercial media and most schools filter information contradicting the ideological claims of market power and its government contract, many of my peers missed hearing the exceptional rhetorical appeals that I encountered, appeals that would have resonated with them, appeals that could have changed their social consciousness and political perspectives, appeals that passed unheeded by the more privileged youth. In

short, rhetoric must be seen, understood, and acted on; rhetoric for change must meet the needs of those capable and interested in changing social relations of power, to find their own power to make a new truth.

This short biographical account closes with how a working-class youth, a participant in mass social movements, also became a reluctant academic. Fifteen years as a machinist and union member working for union democracy in the steelworkers' union, affirmative action, solidarity with Central American revolution, and improved labor contracts ends with a battle over a plant closing, a precursor to the disruptions of globalization and technology. Our plant closed but not before the local union won major severance benefits in health care, retirement, and education. Most of my co-workers opted for training in HVAC or electronics; I chose to improve communication for the union, to learn how to appeal to members and allies misinformed by the media and corporations. The process ended in a graduate degree, while opportunities for union work as a machinist disappeared. So, here I am, a hybrid, organic intellectual in Gramscian terms, in a new privileged social position, but personally informed and motivated by decades of experiences campaigning for a better world.

My experience informs my understanding, my knowing, and places me against the stream of the poststructuralist, postmodernist, rhetorical turn, against immaterial cultural studies and identity politics. Hence, I replied to what I found to be misguided and irresponsible claims by Ernest Laclau and Chantal Moufee in the case of the Nicaraguan revolution (Artz), for example. I offered a materialist-based rhetorical analysis: rhetoric was not the reason Nicaraguans removed the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, nor was rhetoric the reason the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) grew from a dozen in 1962 to win 75% of the popular vote in 1984, the first democratic election in Nicaragua, then to be displaced by a US-backed regime in 1990. Rhetoric provided the spark only when the material culture was mature. As the working class grew, the agricultural working class politically matured, the capitalist classes were betrayed by Somoza, the professional middle class found no satisfactory accommodation to the dictatorship, and the Christian life of the working classes found Liberation Theology, which spoke to their everyday conditions; then—and only then—the FSLN led the Nicaraguan revolution. In 1962, the rhetoric of the FSLN meant little, was heard by few; in 1978—a unique conjunctural moment in history having to do with rapidly changing social class relations, including the political and economic contradictions of international capitalism—the FSLN found the material ground necessary for their rhetorical and political leadership. Notably, as class relations, size, power, experience, and alliances changed (including changes in international class relations in the form of US intervention), the FSLN rhetoric remained static, out of step with the new social relations of class power in Nicaragua and the world. Anti-Somoza rhetoric forged a revolution, it offered no guide for building a new democratic order. By 1990, the FSLN was retreating from its nascent

revolutionary program, assaulted by the US–contra war and unable to delineate a program for a new Nicaragua. Since then, the FSLN has fragmented, former FSLN leader Daniel Ortega was elected president again, but this time with a populist rhetoric that accommodates neoliberalism.

Meanwhile, the dynamics of the Bolivarian socialist project in Venezuela and the success of working class and indigenous social movements in Bolivia and Ecuador create political space for the resurgence of more radical politics in Nicaragua and elsewhere. In every case, the trajectory and outcome depend on the social relations of material power, not simply the rhetorical flourishes of charismatic leaders. Indeed, the modern history of Venezuela belies reliance on rhetoric absent social conditions. Hugo Chavez attempted an ill-advised coup in 1992, a bold antifa-style adventure that had found no popular support, but his return as a candidate in the 1998 elections resonated with a more politically active population. Chavez replaced his heroic epic with a new rhetoric of participatory democracy, community-based parallel institutions, and 21st-century socialism. Millions answered the Chavez rhetorical call to overcome the political corruption, economic malaise, and inequality of capitalism. Delivering policies and programs for literacy, employment, housing, education, media access, and participatory cultural change, the Chavez rhetoric was on solid, practical ground with empirical evidence supporting his appeals. In contrast the limits of rhetoric can be easily discerned when comparing Lula and Rouseff in Brazil and the Kirchners in Argentina with Chavez and Maduro in Venezuela. In Argentina and Brazil, rhetoric substituted for actual social change; in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, the rhetoric of 21st-century socialism carries and is reinforced by palpable actions and government performance.

A more recent and domestic illustration comes from the Barack Obama presidency. Obama's rhetoric of hope, change, and fairness drew thousands to the two-party electoral system—a process partially reenacted by the Bernie Sanders 2016 campaign. Obama's pledge to represent all Americans was cheered and applauded, but his rhetoric was just that in the pejorative sense—just rhetoric—words without substance, promises without intent. Capitalists did not fear him; indeed, many financed his campaign. His presidential actions quickly affirmed his allegiance to capitalism, while his mass support rationalized the need for pragmatic politics and how much better off they were with Obama than Bush or any other Republican or Democrat. At that point, Obama should have unfurled George Bush's "Mission Accomplished" banner over Wall Street; he had succeeded in winning consent from disillusioned millions who had soured on the US political system, bringing them by the thousands back to the hegemonic institutions, conversations, and vocabularies of capitalist rule. Within Obama's first 100 days in office, the public subsidy of private banks, the expansion of the war on Afghanistan, the protection of health care insurance companies, and the continued social inequality of race, gender, and class were seamlessly maintained, indeed, restitched with solid public support. During his rule, Obama deported more immigrants than all of

the US presidents of the 20th century combined; his drones killed ten times as many as George Bush's, and he adroitly diverted all challenges to racial inequality and violence against black youth. Obama channeled possibilities for real social change into an electoral chimera, securing consent for capitalist politics in the process. The power of rhetoric was revealed! (Of course, the willing participation of the entire commercial media apparatus and the two-party political system was in full gear during Obama's two terms to supplement the rationalized misplaced hopes of millions of citizens.)

For capitalist hegemony, mass consent for the market and liberal pluralism is paramount and not a particular candidate's success. Corporate American and the transnational capitalism system can prosper with Clinton, Bush, Obama, or Trump. The vagaries of partisan politics and its tragic consequences for millions is of secondary concern, as long as order is maintained. Any captain will do, as long as they steer the boat in the right direction and protect those on the top decks. Thus, in the United States and in most nations now in the orbit of transnational globalization, political campaigning has become constant, elections and party activity the norm. As Bruce Gronbeck discovered almost three decades ago, US presidential campaigns, and candidate-choice only contests in general, do not function primarily as political decision-making in any democratic sense, but as rituals that "make us feel generally content with the process" while producing "both acquiescence and quiescence" (217). Despite the distortions of public interest and majority preference following the 2016 election of Donald Trump, commercial media and politicians from both parties work overtime to reinforce two-party elections and capitalism as the essence of democracy. In one of many examples, the *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow asserts "the power of resistance is limited, and the best way to achieve real change ... won't come until the polls open in the next round of elections" (A21). Whatever calamity might befall citizens, above all, they must be convinced of the political hegemony of capitalism and its deformed version of democracy.

These examples, selectively rendered here, represent observations of a veteran social activist and professor of media studies. In this view, rhetoric must meet and adjust to social relations, but rhetoric without regard to social relations (or covering for those social relations) will not change anything fundamentally. So why do other, see differently? With the five richest capitalists (who make profits from the labor of millions) now owning as much wealth as 50% of the world, why do many still discount social class and the glaring social inequality of the capitalist world?

Humans have amazing biological and physical capabilities, sight being among the most remarkable. Yet, our eyes have a peculiar trait: they have no visual receptors where the optic nerve connects the eye to the brain. Hence, we all have a blind spot. An object close to the eye, prominent in the field of vision, disappears from our view. The object does not disappear simply because it is not perceived; it disappears because of our unique blind spot. It's there, we just

don't see it. Communication and media studies has a similar sociological and professional blind spot. Located within institutions serving power, US academics have a perceptual handicap that often cannot see capitalism and social class contradictions. Read any mass communication, advertising, public relations, journalism, or media studies mass market textbook. Most promote the ideology of liberal pluralism and the myth of the "free marketplace of ideas" (e.g., Folkerts, Lacy, and Larabee). There are very few that do not at least accept the validity, if not the preference, of wages, profits, and the capitalist market as the best of all possible worlds. Public interest appears as one of many market side effects, offering opportunities for more markets and advertising. Even in rhetoric texts, where the presumption of democracy remains, social class, class inequality, or capitalism do not appear in the glossary of key terms. But what is more defining of our current global condition than capitalist social relations?

Predictably, activists nurtured on these nuggets (as well as most activists weaned on popular culture and its insistence on superheroes to the rescue and valorization of narcissistic celebrities) are inspired to "speak truth to power!" Why? Who cares? Power is the source of the problem. Power knows the truth of social inequality and exploitation of labor for corporate profits. Power concedes nothing without demand, as Frederick Douglass so cogently noted. Truth has no bearing on corporate functions, only market share and public perception. Speaking truth to power only reinforces power. We don't need more truth, we have an abundance of evidence of climate change, gender discrimination, racist violence against black youth, corporate deception, and government corruption. What we need is to activate, to realize our own power. We need to speak power to the truth of social inequality, to speak power to the truth of an emergent, democratic leadership. We are not the grass roots, or an alternative: we are the majority.

In many cases, we learn the truth that power already knows long after the fact. Did class power know the truth about the US genocide of Native Americans, the criminal (and unnecessary) atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the absence of incubator babies in Kuwait, the fabricated claims of nuclear weapons in Iraq, or the videotaped evidence of police murders of black youth? We know the truths that power already knows: institutional racism, gender discrimination, poverty, air pollution, inadequate health care ... A strategy of speaking truth to power neutralizes any rhetoric for change, because it is predicated on accepting existing power as the decider (as George Bush would have it). Rather than communicating with those in power who benefit from the already known truth of wage exploitation and social inequality, humanity would be better served by conversations among those who will benefit from creating new truths, new powers.

Rhetoric and activism. Three things. First, recognize the material conditions of our lives, especially the social relations of capitalism and its class contradictions in neoliberalism, consumerism, individualism, two-party elections, and the quality and inequality of life. Explaining why she joined the FSLN, a young

female biologist said that as she learned about the planet, she realized that “to be a biologist is to be a revolutionary.” Second, identify those who are capable of making fundamental social change—those social classes that have a vested interest, some predisposition, and are in a position socially, economically, and politically to reorganize society for social justice and humanity. Dockworkers, railworkers, IT workers, farmworkers, and others have the power to halt a war, stop a fascist rally, and prevent the production and distribution of unsafe or environmentally destructive products. Their actions depend on mass consent, but their actions can also inspire and lead others to take action. Finally, present a rhetoric for a new consensual, participatory social power emphasizing the truth of capitalist inequality and its destruction of human life and the environment. Offer rhetoric advocating participatory communities, expressing the need for new democratic social relations—in Gramscian terms, advancing a new cultural hegemony that demonstrates the benefits of a new socialist society.

The urgent task of rhetoric for social change and social justice is to speak the power of truth. The power and truth of the existing transnational capitalist order are connected. The truth is we live in a class society that drags the nation to war killing working people abroad and destroying lives at home. Truth is profit-driven production for consumption is destroying the earth. The truth is we live in class society, with race and gender inequality cutting across class lines. The truth is the working majority has the interest, need, and power to end and prevent US wars anywhere, to halt global warming, and to end race and gender discrimination. We need to learn who we are.*

Once aware of the truth of capitalism, the working majority can become aware of its own power and its ability to change the world. An effective rhetoric of social change necessarily arises from those material conditions. On the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, history tells of Russian peasants who walked away from the front lines and ended World War I. Fifty years ago, freedom riders asking for coffee at lunch counters prompted a mass civil rights movement that ended Jim Crow segregation. Less than 20 years ago, indigenous workers led an uprising in Cochabamba, Bolivia, that stopped the privatization of water . . . other movements may not have had the same success, but the material conditions for resistance and transformation recur from Vietnam to South Africa, from Palestine to Venezuela, from Ferguson to Sioux lands in North Dakota. Although media entertainment, news, political power, and state coercion seek compliance, everywhere daily life urges each of us to overcome injustice. Social justice advocates can offer persuasive appeals that move those visceral responses to conscious political action. The future of humanity depends on those who work to speak, to act, to lead. Rhetoric and activism for democracy and social justice must speak the power of that truth: working people keep the world running; working people should run the world.

*Here is a short lyric on our collective self-recognition that has been well received when publicly delivered. Modification and use of this benediction—words to benefit all—are encouraged.

WE
So who are WE?
We need a vocabulary for we—not I or me—but WE.
I only am because of you, because of us,
I am because WE are.

We need a VOCABULARY of WE.
But First we need a SENSE of WE.
Who WE are and what WE need, what WE want ...

WE are not those on TV, in the Magazines, or Movies.
We are not the RNC, the DNC, ABC, or NBC.
We are not any C-E-O any corporation.

WE are not those images of Superstars, Super Heroes, or even SOCIAL
MEDIA pics.
We are not a collection of individual success stories of You or ME.
WE did not invade Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan.
WE did not decide 25,000 of ours starved today.

WE.
WE are those who work by the hour, the week, the job.
WE are those
who do not survive without the hour, the week, the job.

WE.
WE are the POWER of the world.
All that WE have—is made by those like US—
Those who live and work by the hour, the week, the job.
The table, the chair, the bread, the beer.

Nothing moves unless WE decide.
The trains, the lights, the food, the electric clocks.
WE keep the world running. It's time that WE run the world.

Lee Artz

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