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CHAPTER 17

PROPAGANDA AMONG THE RUINS

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If Kenneth Burke did not turn propaganda on its head in the 1930s, he at least flipped it sideways. The writer, critic, and rhetorical theorist who lived and wrote for the better part of the twentieth century treated propaganda much as he claimed to have treated the label “esthete” once that term became “leveled” at “an entire literary generation”: “before ‘clearing out’ myself,” Burke wrote in 1932, “I thought I would take one last look around, to see if anybody had left anything of value in the hastiness of departure” (“Auscultation” 61).

Likewise with propaganda, Burke wanted to salvage a concept that had, around the same time, become synonymous with threat or menace, ascribed an unquestionable evil tenor for its association with the fascism that had been festering and spreading in Europe. The Yale psychologist and propaganda scholar Leonard Doob (on whom more later) summed up the prevailing attitude to propaganda as follows: “In America the word ‘propaganda’ has a bad odor” (3). But Burke elected not to throw out the propaganda baby with the smelly fascist bathwater, and, in doing so, he was part of a distinct minority. As political theorist Erika King notes, in the widespread interest in “mass manipulation” between the wars, “only a few lone voices rose to the defense of propaganda” (30). Any defense of propaganda likely resulted from a realization that propaganda, like fire, can be used to fight itself.

Kenneth Burke was indeed on fire when it came to the topic of propaganda—how it ought to be used, and later, how it ought to be approached critically. His was an unorthodox approach to propaganda, and it deserves attention because it did not always sit well with his audiences. In order to consider Burke’s distinctive approach to propaganda, I will proceed chronologically, beginning with one important preface to Burke’s direct treatments of propaganda, a response essay that appeared in The New Republic in the early weeks of 1931. Although that response does not mention the term propaganda, it details the features of what would become Burke’s approach to propaganda: the more
subtle and nimble the propaganda, the more easily it can move into new places and different lives. Two short essays published in 1933 then help to set the scene for Burke's explicit engagement with propaganda. He began with the question of propaganda's relationship to art, a question of the day. "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," the speech he delivered at the First American Writers' Congress in 1935, formed Burke's emphatic answer to the question of propaganda's place in the lives of artists and writers, and the controversy provoked by that speech sent Burke further into the scholarship on propaganda. In 1936 he published two reviews of social-psychological books on propaganda, and those reviews show him working even harder—and against the social psychologists—to articulate the importance of rhetoric for studies of propaganda. In the year following Burke's reviews of the more "scientific" studies of propaganda, he made two interventions, both in the pages of The New Republic, that figure into the story of his take on propaganda. The first was a pithy critical piece showing how propaganda drives news headlines, and the second was a review of a painting. That review shows Burke circling back to art and further linking his propaganda in action to a kind of propaganda criticism. The year 1937, therefore, provides a crucial pivot between the 1935 and 1939 speeches. A small selection of writings composed in the months and years following the 1935 speech fed Burke's 1939 speech "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle.' That speech, in addition to being the crown of his critical achievements (a point made by several scholars), is the culmination of all the propaganda-related work Burke had done up to that point, and it reaps the rewards of his immersion in the question of propaganda throughout the decade. The speech also brings to the fore (and to the title) the idea of rhetoric, which he had been using in all his engagements with propaganda to that point. As such, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle' " seals and performs Burke's commitment to rhetoric as an art that can guide practice and criticism. Tracking the evolution of Burke's thought on propaganda helps bring into sharper view the usefulness of a rhetorical perspective for propaganda studies.

1931: The Art of Boring from Within

As Ann George and Jack Selzer note, Burke's essay "Boring from Within," a response to Edmund Wilson's "An Appeal to Progressives," both published in The New Republic, shows Burke proposing an idea that would reappear in his "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," the famous and controversial speech Burke delivered in 1935. The idea Burke proposes in "Boring" is really more of a spirit than an idea, and it should be noted (as scholars of the Socialist and Communist movements in the early part of the century know well) that neither the idea nor the phrase was all that new, but it was controversial. In order to promote communism in America, Burke argues, one ought to incorporate the ideals of communism into all aspects of one's life and to take the message to all possible audiences. One should be resolute in commitment but subtle in presentation. As Burke puts it, "We should never weaken. And we should never speech-make." Speech
making does little to convert people. Instead, one's resoluteness ought to be tempered by careful attention and deep commitment to the values of others. The message ought to go broad and "bore from within." As a first step:

We must all become Republicans and Democrats, members of Tammany Hall in New York, members of the Vare organization in Philadelphia, shaking hands with the worst of them, frequenting their speakeasies, gambling in their dens, attending their churches, patronizing their brothels. We must join Rotary Clubs; we must play checkers at the Y.M.C.A. We must demand unceasingly the expulsion of Reds. We must be conformity itself. (328)

Burke exhorts his left-leaning readers to dwell in places where the noncommunists dwell, to fraternize with those whom they might like to convince. Once "within," they ought to follow this recipe for "boring":

... occasionally, over drinks and a cigar, we must say lightly to our boon companions (training ourselves to forget that we would like to strangle them), we must say lightly, "Why don't the big fellows have to part with a little more income in times like these?" We would speculate at random as to how much deprivation a man might suffer by receiving only ten millions a year instead of forty—whereupon we should fall to denouncing the Reds rabidly, and end in a swoon of expansionistic delight as we pictured America conquering all Europe with a handful of Marines. (328)

It is worth dwelling for a spell on Burke's tone here, which reads as tongue-in-cheek hyperbole in its advocacy for "rabidly" renouncing communists while promoting swoons "of expansionistic delight." The tone is as humorous as it is insistent, which may have worked to disarm readers further to the middle and right—they might chuckle in spite of themselves. But I also think the tone works to draw in the more hardline readers of The New Republic, for whom "boring from within" (as opposed to from without) might seem too passive, or at least not emphatic enough. Burke continues by describing another scene of interaction, an even "more important" one than those at the Y or the Rotary:

... we must go among the farmers, asking them questions. They will tell us not to plant potatoes at the dark of the moon—or is it the other way round? They will have strong views on the tuberculin test, and we will take our lesson weekly. And we'll attack the Reds, and nationalization of industry, and atheists (though the Constitution, bless us, was written and adopted by atheists)—and we'll slip in a few words about the income tax. The tax on big income (smilingly) would never hurt the farmer! In fact, why shouldn't the farmer be protected at the expense of industrialists? And then ask about pests on the apple—for the farmer can tell you some interesting things about pest on the apple, and the sooner our radicals learn to respect the farmer's lore, the sooner the worst is over. (328)

In rescuing the notion of "boring from within" with charm and verve, Burke articulates the agenda for what would become his approach to propaganda. Were Burke's approach
one of slogan-making, "Respect the farmer's lore" would have been a good one. But his was emphatically not that sort of approach. Through the thick layers of irony, there is a resounding message: an ideal propagandist ought to treat her work as something like a calling, a vocation, so thoroughly devoting herself to answering that call that she seeks out different, new places to inhabit, paying keen attention to the values and knowledge-sets that prevail there. The propagandist would "respect the farmer's lore" without saying so. In other words, one would give oneself over so thoroughly to audience as to end up planted firmly in the domain of rhetoric. Rhetoric, an art whose teachers have long exhorted people to know their audience, is the best tool for "boring"—subtly, surely—"from within."

1933: PROPAGANDA AND ART

If "Boring from Within" set forth Burke's rhetorical approach to spreading socialism, two essays published in 1933 show him immersed in a more specialized question of art's relationship to propaganda. That question was well-worn territory in the 1930s, and it was territory that Burke treded again and again. In December, Burke published "The Nature of Art Under Capitalism" in The Nation, which followed a longer piece entitled "War, Response, and Contradiction," published in the October issue of the more specialized literary publication Symposium. In the former, he "proposes to say something further on the subject of art and propaganda" (314), and in the latter he makes the case for "the relation between art and propaganda" as being an issue that "carries far beyond" its perceived status as "a haggle among literary specialists" (234).

Of the two essays, "The Nature of Art" takes a more pointed approach. In a seven-proposition nutshell, Burke argues that art in the age of capitalism must not remain "pure," which is to say that art must be created with an end beyond itself. That end, for Burke, ought to be largely "corrective": "it must have a definite horatory function, an element of suasion or inducement of the educational variety; it must be partially forensic" (321). "Such a quality," he continues, invoking his characteristic first-person plural, "we consider to be the essential work of propaganda" (321). Burke believes capitalism's corruption of what he labels the "work processes" "calls for a propaganda art" (321). Propaganda art, for Burke, contrasts with what he calls "pure art," though he unravels the distinction even as he posits it: "incidentally," he writes, "our distinction as so stated should make it apparent that much of the so-called 'pure' art of the nineteenth century was of a pronouncedly propagandist or corrective coloring" (321).

These two essays are useful when read together because the former more explicitly lays out Burke's perspective on "propaganda art," and the latter broadens the scope of the question to the everyday values Burke, in his 1931 essay, suggested one ought to use to bore into the lives and worlds of those who oppose the ideals of communism. In establishing the broad relevance of questions about art at the outset of "War, Response, and
Contradiction,” Burke links the seemingly abstract realm of art to ethics, attitudes, and the everyday:

Aesthetical values are intermingled with ethical values—and the ethical is the basis of the practical. Or, put more simply: our ideas of the beautiful, the curious, the interesting, the unpleasant, the boring are closely bound with our ideas of the good, the desirable, the undesirable—and our ideas of the desirable and the undesirable have much to do with our attitudes towards our everyday activities. (234)

Here, Burke's suturing of art to everyday attitudes and activity matters a good deal for his view of propaganda. "Art," Burke writes emphatically in “War, Response, and Contradiction,” “is a means of communication” (235). And this includes the category Burke labels “pure” art, which, as he puts it in proposition 5, “tends to promote a state of acceptance” (320).

Driving both 1933 essays is what Burke sees as a problem with proletarian literature, a preferred genre of response to capitalist corruption among his writer and artist peers. “The Nature of Art Under Capitalism” ends with a critique of proletarian art that would form the basis of his critique at the Writers' Congress two years later. Proletarian literature, he argued in 1933, is “inadequate” as propaganda “since it shows us so little of the qualities in mankind worth saving” (322). He continues: “Too often, alas, it serves as a mere device whereby the neuroses of the decaying bourgeois structure are simply transferred to the symbols of working-men” (322). And so while, as George and Selzer aptly demonstrate, “the traditional dichotomy between poetry and propaganda” operating in this Nation piece would become “untenable for Burke” later in the decade (80); that distinction—tenuous as it was for him even in 1933—nevertheless enabled Burke to pinpoint his disapproval of what then stood for “propaganda art.” Proletarian literature and art, that is, would not do for Burke. Although its creators may have thought they were “boring from within,” their approach was altogether too “harsh” and negative in its “cult of disaster” (322). In effect, for Burke, proletarian art is too dismissive of bourgeois values and attitudes, too devoid of rhetorical sensibility, to catch on.

Toward the end of “War, Response, and Contradiction,” Burke turns to Nietzsche in order to stress the need for pressing beyond mere dismissal (an act of which he believes Archibald McLeish, one of the subjects of the essay, is guilty). This strategy of refusing easy dismissal ends up guiding Burke's rhetorical-propagandistic method as much as it does his method as a critic of literature, art, or rhetoric. For Burke, Nietzsche “knew that the morality of combat is no despicable thing, that morals are fists, and that we cannot stop at noting the savagery of some slayer or the greed of some financial monopolist” (256). In other words, Burke did not believe that true engagement with anything—art or money or murder—ought to lead full stop to critical dismissal. One should resist the urge to dismiss even those whom his readers, to invoke “Boring from Within,” “would like to strangle.” A dismissive wave of the hand does nothing to alter the conditions that one is critiquing. And the economic and labor conditions brought about by capitalism mattered deeply to Burke and to the state of the nation and its people.
Against this backdrop of criticizing capitalism and fascism, Burke would formulate his own view of what propaganda art ought to be, and that view would not be confined to art at all, but it would become propaganda as a way of life, a vocation to which one answers with every utterance and every action. Burke approached propaganda as a vital and daily cultural practice, a thoroughly rhetorical mode of being in the world.

1935: "REVOLUTIONARY SYMBOLISM" IN PROPAGANDA

In many ways, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," the speech Burke delivered to the First American Writers' Congress (1935), was his most thorough and pointed statement about propaganda. It was also his most controversial. The question of Burke's role in the first Writers' Congress is by no means new territory. Frank Lentricchia reads Burke's speech—and its loric effects—as incendiary for those in attendance (21–25). Michael Denning and Ann George and Jack Selzer provide important correctives to Lentricchia's account (Denning 442; George and Selzer 22–29), crediting Burke's speech to the congress as moving the Left closer to what Denning calls "the strategy of the Popular Front" (Denning 443; George and Selzer 28). George and Selzer additionally emphasize the speech's "understanding of literature as both persuasion and source of identification" (28). The speech also illustrates what a rhetorical perspective on propaganda might have to offer. What it offers is a receptive, inclusive approach to attitude and a frank discussion of Burke's then-developing notion of identification, a term that would become one of his most enduring legacies for rhetorical theory.

The importance of identification in Burke's contribution to the humanities can hardly be overstated. Dana Anderson puts it succinctly when he writes that "Kenneth Burke's abode in mainstream rhetorical studies is the home that identification built" (20; emphasis in original), and Jonathan Arac argues that Burke is "the first English-language critic to make extended, crucial use of the terms identity and identification" (203). It is crucial to note that the term identification—the idea that suasion works best when one's ways or beliefs or approaches are knitted together with those of others—came to life for Burke in the context of propaganda, and, importantly, in such a controversial context. In the context of writer-intellectuals, controversy can often be the fan to the flames of a theory.

Controversial as it may have been, the speech begins on a strikingly uncontroversial note—if not as uncontroversial as asking a farmer to tell you how to keep pests off your apples, then close. The opening sentences focus on how symbols work in political movements:

When considering how people have cooperated, in either conservative or revolutionary movements of the past, we find that there is always some unifying principle about which their attachments as a group are polarized. I do not refer to
such mere insignia as tricolor, hammer and sickle, swastika, crucifix, or totem pole—but to the subtle complex emotions and attitudes for which such insignia are little more than the merest labels. (87)

Such “attachments” Burke calls “illusory,” noting that “if you find a man attached to some cause, and keep pressing him with questions, he will not be able to point out the nature of his attachment in the way he might if you ask him to point to his house” (87). Burke then zeros in on the symbol about which the “Communists generally focus their scheme of allegiance” (88): the symbol of the worker. “Accordingly,” he continues, “my paper will discuss this symbol, and to what extent it fulfills the conditions of attachment” (88). He adds: “I should clearly emphasize the fact that I shall consider this matter purely from the standpoint of propaganda” (88; emphasis in original). What Burke means by the “standpoint of propaganda” is both a critical and a practical, action-based standpoint. He explains:

Insofar as a writer really is a propagandist, not merely writing work that will be applauded by his allies, convincing the already convinced, but actually moving forward like a pioneer into outlying areas of the public and bringing them the first favorable impressions of his doctrine, the nature of his trade may give rise to special symbolic requirements. Accordingly, it is the propaganda aspect of the symbol that I shall center upon—considering the symbol particularly as a device for spreading the areas of allegiance. (89)

By now it ought to be clear that the Burke of the mid-1930s would nod emphatically at Russ Castronovo’s observation that “the most significant propaganda is not the sort that screams for action in big red letters” (184). It needn’t be soaked in blood. Burke reserves the names “pamphleteer” and “political organizer” for those who do choose to shout in bold, visible letters, calling their work “explicit propaganda” (“Revolutionary” 91). Under the head of “implicit propaganda,” then, he offers the kind of inductive, “boring-from-within” approach that he advocated in 1931. This approach, he suggests, uniquely suits those who work “in the purely imaginative field”: the writers and artists attending the congress.

Implicit propaganda is both associative and durable, for one who practices it “indirectly links his cause with the kinds of intellectual and emotional engrossments that are generally admired. He speaks on behalf of his cause, not in the ways of a lawyer’s brief, but by the sort of things he associates with it” (91). In offering implicit propaganda as a strategy, what he calls a “precept” (91), he presents propaganda as a way of living, a deliberate way of injecting one’s message into everything one says and does. To the person who achieves such depth, Burke gives the title of “complete propagandist”:

the complete propagandist, it seems to me, would take an interest in as many imaginative, aesthetic, and speculative fields as he can handle—and into this breadth of his concerns he would interweave a general attitude of sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy towards our oppressive institutions. In this way he would
ally his attitudes with everything that is broadest and fullest in the world to-day. 
And he would argue for his political sympathies, not literally and directly, but by the 
intellectual company he keeps. (90–91)

Here, the word complete marks the propagandist’s utter thoroughness—an ability and 
commitment to saturate everything one does with that message, and pushing the mes-
 sage to people from all walks of life, from YMCA checker players to Rotarians to farmers. 
Furthermore, Burke’s recommendation that his peers adopt a strategy of implicit pro-
paganda in order to become complete propagandists themselves suggests that Burke’s 
innovation was to transform critical methods into strategies for practice. Burke’s ideas 
of identification and attitude help to further delineate the distinctly rhetorical approach 
that results from such patient, integrative thinking. These are the concepts that bring 
propaganda to life, and to lives. They also, importantly, add a new component to pro-
paganda studies, shifting attention away from the content of the propaganda and to the 
relations between propagandist and audience, showing how indispensable rhetorical 
theory is for studies of propaganda.

In this same passage, Burke also hints at the way the complete propagandist works 
rhetorically. When he writes that the person practicing such propaganda “would ally 
his attitudes with everything that is broadest and fullest in the world to-day” (91), he 
focusses once again on the importance of connecting to existing attitudes. Such an atti-
tudinal alliance cannot be formed unless the poet (Burke’s name for artist) “makes the 
soundest contribution in this wise: He shows himself alive to all the aspects of contem-
porary effort and thought” (90). That is, such a receptive, integrative approach to one’s 
message and to one’s culture enables one to maximize opportunities for spreading that 
message, not just across one’s own life, but into the lives of others. The impulse to make 
one’s message as broadly appealing as possible motivates the main argument of Burke’s 
controversial speech at the First Writers’ Congress. In this argument, Burke both per-
forms and explicitly theorizes the belief put forth in “Boring from Within” that propa-
ganda ought to reach and range, and that theorization depends on rhetoric, and more 
specifically, identification and attitude.

After a brief mention of social psychologist Harold D. Lasswell’s treatment of “a rev-
olutionary period” as “one in which the people drop their allegiance to one myth, or sym-
bol, and shift to another in its place” (“Revolutionary” 88), Burke proposes shifting the 
“symbol of the worker” as the symbol on which “the Communists generally focus their 
scheme of allegiance” (88) to the symbol of the people:

The symbol I should plead for, as more basic, more of an ideal incentive, than 
that of the worker, is that of “the people.” In suggesting that “the people,” rather 
than “the worker,” rate highest in our hierarchy of symbols, I suppose I am 
suggesting fundamentally that one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary 
thought among the lower middle class without using middle-class values—just 
as the Church invariably converted pagans by making the local deities into 
saints. (89–90)
At this point in the speech, identification and rhetoric become central both for this speech and for Burke’s theory of propaganda. The complete propagandist makes it possible for others to identify with his message by featuring symbols that already speak to a group’s attitudes, much as with the pagan gods in the passage quoted earlier. Swapping worker for people constitutes, for Burke, a termindistic incentive capable of guiding a revolution in Burke’s America. To lead that revolution, Burke’s propagandizer must, of course, give over more than one’s self to the cause. One must hand over one’s preferred terms in exchange for terms valued, and attitudes held, by the as-yet unconvinced. He puts it plainly, reminding his immediate audience once again that the propagandist’s job is to reach beyond the already convinced: “As a propagandizer, it is not his work to convince the convinced, but to plead with the unconvinced, which requires him to use their vocabulary, their values, their symbols, insofar as this is possible” (92; emphasis in original). At the heart of this statement and its stress on the word their lies identification, Burke’s thoroughly rhetorical concept that considers audience foremost while shaping a message. And this includes potential and distant audiences, the they of the passage’s their.

In a discussion of Burke’s speech during the Writers’ Congress, Burke clarifies his point about how the symbol of the worker ought to operate. “I did not mean,” he said,

that there is anything negative about the worker symbol in itself, but only insofar as it tends to overly restrict a writer’s range of interests and emphases. In practice it tends to focus a writer’s attention upon traits that enlist our sympathies—whereas by a positive symbol I meant that one enlists not only our sympathies but also our ambitions. (Hart 171; emphasis in original)

By linking ambitions with sympathies in his formulation of positive identification, Burke shows how words can help fuse imagined futures. In the words of his speech, “propaganda (the extension of one’s recruiting into ever widening areas) is possible only insofar as the propagandizer and the propagandized have kindred values, share the same base of reference” (91). The idea of rhetorical fusion—fused values, fused interests, and fused futures—persists in this passage, driving Burke’s notion of identification and combining with Burke’s discussion of exclusion and inclusion.

Exclusion and inclusion is another important distinction Burke forwarded to the attendees of the First American Writers’ Congress. On the one hand, there is what he calls propaganda by exclusion, which he characterizes as “a tendency to eliminate from one’s work all that does not deal specifically” with the realities involved in one’s cause. Such a singular focus—he gives the example of the focus on workers’ oppression—remains unable to fully connect with anyone, even, he argues in this instance, the workers (93). On the other hand, there is “propaganda by inclusion,” which he leaves undefined except by deduction: it works in the opposite direction of propaganda that works by exclusion. Propaganda by inclusion, that is, allows for the complexity of multiple perspectives by going wide rather than focusing narrowly on one part of one cause. It encompasses a range of attitudes, thereby making possible infinite identifications.
By the end of the First Writers’ Congress, Burke had set forth a plan for shifting the Left’s strategy. And the plan—to swap the term “worker” for the term “people”—was as simple as the underlying method was comprehensive. That is, it would not be enough for Burke’s colleagues to alter one little word in their message. That alteration must accompany a radical change in the places to which they take that message. And yet it was the simpler solution that caused the controversy.

Burke’s paper was one of two papers that “provoked most of the discussion” at the congress, according to Henry Hart, who assembled the speeches and subsequent discussion into one volume (165). As Ann George and Jack Selzer explain, Burke’s proposal to shift away from the word worker, though not a modest one, was, for some, perhaps too moderate, too unrecognizably communist (19, 25–26), but the shift to the word people was perceived as downright dangerous. As congress attendee Allen Porter pointed out in his discussion of the speech, “the word ‘people’ is historically associated with demagoguery of the most vicious sort” (Hart 167). The German writer Friedrich Wolf spoke up, noting that “Hitler and Rosenberg used it. They said, let us not talk any more about the workers, let us talk about the people” (Hart 167). Burke, when asked to reply to the criticisms, had this to say:

I wish that some one had discussed the issue from my point of attack, the problem of propaganda. I think we are all agreed that we are trying to defend a position in favor of the workers, that we are trying to enlist in the cause of the workers. There is no issue about that. The important thing is: how to make ourselves effective in this particular social structure? I am trying to point out that there is a first stage where the writer’s primary job is to disarm people. First you knock at the door—and not until later will you become wholly precise. (Hart 170)

In knocking at the door of propaganda, Burke caused quite a commotion. As controversies tend to do, this one—“the problem of propaganda”—would remain with him, and he with it. In the next three years, Burke would attempt to become even more precise, making plain the importance of rhetoric to his proposal, which was far more than just a proposal about a word-swap.

1936: The Social-Psychological Perspective

Perhaps to sharpen his “point of attack” in the year following the first congress, Burke would set about reviewing key scientific studies of propaganda—and two studies of propaganda in particular, one by Harold Lasswell entitled Propaganda: Who Gets What and How?, and the other by Leonard Doob, Propaganda: Its Psychology and Technique. As Burke’s reviews of the books reveal, these studies helped him to clarify his views on propaganda and rhetoric. They did so by eliciting a strong, though mixed, response from
him and also by putting into play terms that appealed to Burke. Doob, for example, gives “attitude” a central place in his psychological study of propaganda, a conceptual move that Burke admires and appears to emulate (however unconsciously). But both Lasswell’s and Doob’s approaches simultaneously inspire and dissatisfy Burke, such that they spur him to further clarify his own approach to propaganda and to articulate rhetoric’s importance for any such approach. In doing so, Burke explicitly returns to the tandem key terms of identification and attitude that further distinguish his approach to propaganda. Like Lasswell and Doob, Burke believed in the usefulness of attitude and identification for a study of propaganda, but he believed they were both missing the idea of rhetoric.

In his review of Doob’s volume (published in The New Republic early in 1936), Burke offers one of his most emphatic statements about the value of a rhetorical perspective on propaganda, and so I want to quote the entire paragraph:

One cannot talk about propaganda without first talking about something else. At the time of Aristotle, propaganda would obviously have been treated under the heading of ‘rhetoric;’ the art of persuading people by the use of symbols. But though the formal devices of rhetoric can be discussed in themselves, the problem quickly shades off into the field of politics—and politics, as handled today, quickly shades off into such fields as economics, psychology, and sociology. For this reason, the study of rhetoric seems to me as quick an entrance to the modern scene as one can get. Hence the importance of a twentieth-century rhetoric, which centers in propaganda and advertising, that is, in the selling of goods and attitudes (the connecting link between propaganda and advertising usually being called “good-will advertising”). (“Anatomy” 371)

For Burke, as is by now evident, propaganda is rhetorical through and through, in that it has an audience (or many possible audiences), a message, and suasive inclinations. Burke’s avowal of rhetoric in his review of Doob’s book frames his main quibble with Doob’s approach: It relies too much on the “‘weapon’” of social psychology (371). For Burke, the “minds” of the masses—Doob’s focus—matter for a study of propaganda, insofar as they serve as an important locus for attitudes and identifications, but the words with which those minds are reached and changed matter equally and merit consideration. He laments that Doob “had paid more attention” to such matters, and notes that “a complete discussion would also require the consideration of our modern rhetorics (propaganda, advertising, tendential news) in line with writings by men like Ogden, Richards, Sapir, and Malinowsky [sic]” (371–372). In this review, then, Burke registers his devotion to rhetoric as both a field of study and as a set of practices.

Even more intriguingly than Burke’s foregrounding of rhetoric’s importance for propaganda is his gravitation toward Lasswell and Doob’s choice of the term attitude to characterize how propaganda works. Attitude, for Burke, is one step from identification. About the Communist Party, Doob notes that its “mass appeals…are calculated to arouse related attitudes favorable to the desired integration” (267) but that the Party instead “stirs” attitudes of hostility that actually thwart such integration. That Doob’s
notion of attitude stuck with Burke and found its way into Burke’s writing in the 1930s and 1940s is evident, again, in Burke’s review of Doob. In summarizing Doob’s view of how the process of propaganda works, most especially the prevailing disidentification with communism, Burke puts it this way:

The propagandist wants to recommend Item A (be Item A a brand of soap, a war, a political philosophy, what you will). And he does so by identifying it with some value, or attitude, that already enjoys prestige in the productive pattern. Thus, since science now enjoys prestige, because technology is so important to our productive pattern, we find advocates as different as Dr. Dewey and a toothpaste firm recommending their products under the aegis of science. When God enjoyed prestige, you might have best sold soap by suggesting that cleanliness is next to godliness. (371; emphasis added)

The link between identification and attitude is clear in this passage: one forges an identification with someone else by identifying one’s message with an attitude, wrapping it in another positive message. Whereas Doob settles for describing how propaganda works in the world, Burke wants to apply those descriptions, to make them into programs.

Rather than end with a grumble, then, Burke uses the space of the review to himself provide such a program, deploying the tools of Aristotelian rhetoric. “The power of suggestion,” he writes, “could be considered as a kind of implied syllogism, that gains its strength through being implicit rather than explicit” (371). This review shows Burke persisting with the distinction between implicit and explicit propaganda so central for his speech at the Writers’ Congress the year prior. His examples—an advertiser for toothpaste using a “picture of a scientist in a laboratory holding up a test-tube,” and “the baby-kissing of a politician”—are interesting forms of syllogistic reasoning. As these examples help to show, Burke’s notion of an implied syllogism is really what Aristotle would call an enthymeme. The enthymeme is Aristotle’s label for rhetorical shorthand, a kind of quick-and-dirty form of logical reasoning, what Burke here calls “a bastardized form of argument” (371). In the Rhetoric, Aristotle promotes this distinctly rhetorical mode of argument over the longhand form of argument favored in philosophical contexts that spell out every premise. Enthymemes pack away chains of syllogistic reasoning and can, therefore, be effective rhetorical tools, as Aristotle suggests, because they induce a kind of “quick learning” (Rhetoric III.10.4) by involving the audience more intimately in supplying missing premises or arriving at a conclusion just as—or better—before a rhetor does. As Burke usefully puts it in his review of Doob’s book,

Inasmuch as the syllogism is merely implied, the reader approaches it ‘creatively.’ He is involved as an ally, made a participant in the formation of the message. He is invited to tell himself something, precisely because the writer of the advertisement has not completed the statement. It is as though the advertisement were to count up to six, and the reader, getting the cue, “creatively” proceeds to supply seven. (371)
So, in Burke's example of a politician's kissing a baby—what Burke calls "the simplest act of propaganda"—the physical enthymeme packs a syllogism that "might run something like this":

"You are uncertain about my future conduct in office; but you feel that the love of babies indicates a love of mankind; my baby-kissing makes it obvious that I love babies; therefore I love mankind; we try to do right by those we love; since I am a lover of mankind, and you are members of mankind, I mean to do right by you." Such arguments are more effective when approached "creatively" rather than "critically." (371)

In unwinding chains of logic enthymematically tamped into a quick smooch on a towhead, Burke packs in his own argument about "creative," inductive modes of argument. Rhetoric, the syllogism's disciplinary home, comes to the fore in this review as the preferred propagandistic mode. Burke's examination of such syllogizing reveals, once again, his preference for implicit propaganda as opposed to explicit propaganda (propaganda that puts it all out there). And it works to bring identification front and center in Burke's rhetorical approach.

Given Burke's expressed dissatisfaction with Doob's scanty treatment of language, it would seem that he would gravitate to the work of Doob's colleague Harold Lasswell, whose book, Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?, Burke reviewed nine months after he reviewed Doob's book, and whose previous book, World Politics and Personal Insecurity, Burke appears to have consulted for his Writers' Congress speech. Lasswell takes a more explicitly symbolic approach, and it is an approach that Burke damns by the faintest of praise when he writes, "Like all works of the purely debunking sort, the book should be serviceable for the purposes of negativistic, disintegrative criticism" ("Methodology" 250). The "purely debunking" and strictly "scientific" criticism leaves Burke wondering whether Lasswell's "terminology is as broad as required by the situation it would chart" (250) and longing for an approach that would analyze "human conduct in an integrative vocabulary" (250). This review makes an important move, noticeable when held up next to the review of Doob. Doob's book sends Burke emphatically to rhetoric to explain what is missing from Doob's ideas, and to supplement them with illustrative explanations of how implied syllogisms work. But Burke's shorter review of Lasswell dwells on the need for a criticism that is not just rhetorical but one that is "integrative." It, therefore, sends him back to the style of rhetorical practice laid out as early as "Boring from Within," but here Burke wants to bring that style to the realm of criticism. Because Doob's and Lasswell's approaches are largely critical—because they show how propaganda works largely in order to debunk it—Burke's engagement with them pulls him more deeply into criticism, giving new, critical legs to his rhetorical philosophy, a philosophy built on an exceedingly broad, open, comprehensive style of engagement. The evidence for this move from propaganda as a practice to criticism of propaganda can be found in two works from 1937.
1937: TOWARD A PROPAGANDA CRITICISM

That Burke was moving toward a mode of analyzing propaganda is by now evident, and that he was moving that direction as 1937 approached makes perfect sense, aligning him perfectly (for once) with trends of the day. The year 1937, after all, saw the founding of an Institute for Propaganda Analysis, which according to Michael Sproule favored a "particular fusion of academic and practical progressivism into an organized antipropaganda critique" (177). As Sproule documents, however, the IPA was beset by the limits of its "cynical debunking spirit" (171). As the IPA took shape, though, Burke was laying the groundwork for a much-needed practical, progressive criticism that maintained the spirit of his earlier interventions.9

In November 1937, again in the pages of The New Republic, Burke published "Reading While You Run: An Exercise in Translation from English into English," a snappy piece of criticism that demonstrates a central claim: "capitalist propaganda is so ingrained in our speech that it is as natural as breathing" (36). In this piece, he examines news headlines of the day using the kind of reverse syllogizing he performed in his examination of Doob's book the previous year. For example, in the headline "Fight for a Return to 'American System'" he finds "some such argument as this: If you are wholesome, you love your country; your country is capitalist; therefore, to be wholesome, you must love capitalism" (36). Along the way, he shows how certain words can be translated from, as the subtitle suggests, "English into English": "industry" according to Burke translates as "Big Business"; "promoters" are really "managers"; "enterprise" indicates "opportunity for excess profits" (36). Such words, micro-instances of identification (37), are used to take the edge off capitalism, to fashion a better fit with the "American Way." "Reading While You Run" could not be more direct in its upshot: "once you allow a promoter to look like a manager, once you allow the channelization of profits to mean the same thing as control of production, you are in for the same old fabulous swing from Republicans to Democrats and from Democrats to Republicans" (37). He concludes: "And the words by which they advocate the swing from one to the other are precisely the words that keep people from getting rid of them both. History is a skilled dramatist, the dramatic irony as the main feature of the plot" (37). Once again, this brief reflection shows Burke using rhetoric as a mode of critique. In exhorting readers of The New Republic to read while they run from capitalism, and in showing history itself to be rife with the kind of dramatic irony he locates in these sly and barely perceptible shifts in language, Burke paved the way for the kind of fine-grained criticism that would guide his later reading of Hitler.

But he made one more return to the previous work on positive propagandistic messages. Later that year, Burke published an art review in which he meditates on propaganda and enacts, briefly but pointedly, his emerging critical method. The painting in question is Peter Blume's The Eternal City (Figure 17.1). Depicting many of Rome's more violent past lives, Blume's work features a backlit depiction of a mostly entombed Christ behind a pile of dismembered antiquities scattered into a rubble with a woman sitting in their midst, begging for alms. The focal point of the painting is a cartoonish rendering of a menacing
Mussolini-in-the-box, popping seemingly out of the painting's depths, his lips painted into a cartoonish bright red snarl, his bulging eyes glaring past the painting's frame, his skin cast in putrid green. In the near background, a battle is waged in the ruins of a temple before a colosseum-style balcony, an enormous and stately tree sprawling between the two structures. In the far background, mountains spike toward backlit clouds.

Burke's review does not waste time with thick description, instead cutting to something of the chase in the third paragraph: "To label it bluntly," Burke writes, "we might call 'The Eternal City' the painting of a surrealist, turned social propagandist" ("Growth" 165). The remainder of the review, in explaining this characterization, offers a lucid depiction of Burke's approach to propaganda. Burke's review takes The Eternal City as an occasion for meditating on the kind of propaganda to which artists and writers ought to aspire, and it stands as a fascinating pivot from his previous work on what sort of propaganda his peers should themselves create to the critical approach to propaganda that would guide his 1939 Writers' Congress speech.

Blume, for Burke, probably most closely approximates what Burke in 1935 called a "complete propagandist" ("Revolutionary" 90). Once Burke labels The Eternal City the work of a social propagandist, he feels he "must hasten to modify" (165) and elaborates in this way:

It does not trifle with enigmas, as so much of surrealism does. And, as propaganda, it extends its range until a total personality is encompassed; the propagandist
element merely takes its place as one function in a broad texture of consciousness, having much more scope and complexity than the artist could possibly include if he conceived of propaganda as a purely utilitarian act (to "sell" this policy as against that policy). (165)

*The Eternal City*’s glowing, glaring image of Mussolini, as Burke indicates, is certainly not difficult to decipher. But, here, Burke is much more concerned with *how* the propagandistic message manifests itself: It is wholly worked into the entire canvas. Later in the review, Burke refers to this fusive approach as “propaganda-plus,” a tag he uses to characterize “the complex way in which political meanings have been fused with other elements, religious, sexual and naturalistic” (165). In the context of his earlier terminology, “propaganda-plus” might be deemed the aim of his complete propagandist. On Burke’s view, propaganda saturates the painting, merging with *The Eternal City*’s many features, tones, and eras. The painting depicts how the propagandist should live; it becomes, for Burke, a representative anecdote for how propaganda can be strengthened by being blended with the tones and tinctures of multiple cultural lives.

Of the painting’s suggestive gathering of disparate images onto the same canvas, Burke notes with admiration in his review, “the possible interconnections are endless” (166). The possible interconnections help to enable infinite possible instances of identification, for a fusion of attitudes, a rhetorical drawing-in of many onlookers. As such, Blume’s painting helps to make visible the kind of mingling Burke advocated as early as six years prior to the review.

In many ways, an essay on Burke’s engagement with propaganda could end with this vibrant and lucid review of Blume’s painting, for it so neatly encapsulates the work he had done up to this point. Its notion of “propaganda-plus” clarifies what his complete propagandist ought to do; its every paragraph bespeaks a commitment to his earlier messages, and its analysis bears the imprint of his engagement with the social psychologists. But the story does not end there; to be “complete” himself, Burke must engage the obverse of a propagandist like Blume. He must finally apply his propaganda approach to the work of a highly successful, though greatly loathed, propagandist. The ideas building through Burke’s review track discernibly into his speech at the Third Writers’ Congress, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle.’”

**Propaganda and Criticism**

If Burke’s speech at the First Writers’ Congress sought to adopt the tools of propaganda without the tenor, then his speech at the Third Writers’ Congress suggests both that he very much found—and filled—that role *and* that he did not much care for the tenor of most existing propaganda criticism.

“The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” begins with Burke expressing his outright disapproval of prior attempts to analyze Hitler’s tome: “The appearance of *Mein Kampf* in
unexpurgated translation has called forth far too many vandalistic comments. There are other ways of burning books than on the pyre—and the favorite method of the hasty reviewer is to deprive himself and his readers by inattention” (191). Mein Kampf, that is, calls for more thoroughgoing consideration than can be given by a career reviewer going about his daily business, a reviewer who might “content himself,” as Burke puts it, “with the mere inflicting of a few symbolic wounds upon this book and its author, of an intensity varying with the resources of the reviewer and the time at his disposal” (191). He continues:

If the reviewer but knocks off a few adverse attitudinizings and calls it a day, with a guaranty in advance that his article will have a favorable reception among the decent members of our population, he is contributing more to our gratification than to our enlightenment. (190)

In other words, reviews of Mein Kampf ought not merely to satisfy the urge to kick the dictator, they ought to educate readers about how the dictator thinks. Here, Burke returns to a point he intimated via Nietzsche in the earlier essay “War, Response, and Contradiction”: Criticism that dismisses is about as practical as no criticism at all.10 As Burke exhorts in tones of near-exasperation, Hitler “has been helpful enough to put his cards face up on the table, that we might examine his hands. Let us then, for God’s sake, examine them” (192). He is quite clear about the ends of such an examination:

Here is the testament of a man who sung a great people into his wake. Let us watch it carefully; and let us watch it, not merely to discover some grounds for prophesying what political move is to follow Munich, and what move to follow that move, etc.: let us try also to discover what kind of “medicine” this medicine-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America. (191)

Burke’s criticism leans on the truism often ascribed to history about understanding the past so as not to repeat it, but here it folds in even more foresight: the goal is understanding propaganda so that propaganda itself can be better discerned, its political effects anticipated and—most importantly—resisted.

What follows is a fine piece of criticism. Michael Denning calls it “perhaps the finest” of propaganda studies during its time, including the issues from the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (107). At the time, Malcolm Cowley called Burke’s analysis his “most brilliant” essay and one of the most “brilliant examples of the critic’s art” (17). What makes this piece of criticism so remarkable? The depth of its analysis, the usefulness of its insights, and its lingering power as a socio-political intervention. “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle” develops and returns to points about the Nazi creation of unity, the religious pattern that creation assumed (208–209, 219), the sloganizing of reason (199), the conditions—economic, political, personal—that led to Hitler’s “spontaneous” anti-Semitism (197), and the resulting creation of a material scapegoat in the figure of the Jew (194–195). And all of these moves happen, importantly, under the banner of rhetoric as a mode of criticism.
Rhetoric's critical mode balances the kind of rhetorical practice that Burke advocated earlier in the decade. Whereas in Burke's review of Blume, the critical mode helped him to cull the features of exemplary propaganda, in his review of Hitler, it helped him to spin a cautionary tale. After a protracted account of the elements in Hitler's propaganda, Burke begins his conclusion by turning to the then-current situation in the United States: “Our job, then, our anti-Hitler Battle, is to find the available ways of making the Hitlerite distortions of religion apparent, in order that politicians of his kind in America be unable to perform a similar swindle” (219). He continues with a sort of syllogistic equation, the style of which makes his point as plain as it is resolute:

The desire for unity is genuine and admirable. The desire for national unity, in the present state of the world, is genuine and admirable. But this unity, if attained on a deceptive basis, by emotional trickeries that shift our criticism from the accurate locus of our trouble, is no unity at all. (219–220)

Burke sifts through Mein Kampf for the formative moments, the what-went-wrong-heres that are not visible when people rush to and stop with the label “evil.” It is a label from which Burke does not shy, but neither does he wish to stop there.

Burke's speech shows how it is not quite right to read Hitler's as a “cult of the irrational”: “irrational it is, but it is carried on under the slogan of 'Reason'” (199). He continues, “Similarly, his cult of war is developed ‘in the name of’ humility, love, and peace” (199). In this way, Burke's analysis operates in the same vein as "Reading While You Run," only it is an exercise in translation from an English translation into English. He enumerates the features of Hitler's anti-Semitic "unification device" (202) for it is not enough simply to label it anti-Semitic; one must unpack such a strategy of disidentification in order to understand it better. In such translation work (which requires the patience he advocated in rhetorical practice), he shows how Hitler performed the "symbolic change" (214) "from the 'spiritual ancestry' of the Hebrew prophets to the 'superior' ancestry of 'Aryanism'" (215), thereby giving "his story a kind of bastardized modernization, along the lines of naturalistic, materialistic 'science,' by his fiction of the special 'blood-stream'" (215). That is, part of Hitler's slogan of Reason worked because he identified his logic with the prevailing values of nature and science.

Burke does not stop with an analysis of Hitler's words. He also considers the material rhetorical aspects of his efforts. He believes Hitler shows "to a very disturbing degree, the power of endless repetition" as evident in circulars for Nazi meetings, which reiterated what Burke calls "two 'complementary' themes": "'Jews not admitted' and 'War victims free'" (217). He discusses Hitler's knowledge of "the power of spectacle" (217) in the context of the overwhelming visual symbol of Nazi guards in Nazi uniforms. All these factors must be considered in a complete analysis of Hitler's propagandistic mode. At one point, Burke charts Hitler's equations in this way:

In sum: Hitler's inner voice, equals leader-people identification, equals unity, equals Reich, equals the mecca of Munich, equals plow, equals sword, equals work, equals war, equals army as midrib, equals responsibility (the personal responsibility of the
absolute ruler), equals sacrifice, equals the theory of “German democracy” (the free popular choice of the leader, who then accepts the responsibility, and demands absolute obedience in exchange for his sacrifice), equals love (with the masses as feminine), equals idealism, equals obedience to nature, equals race, nation. (206)

This set of identificatory “equations” spills into a footnote that sprawls onto the next page, aptly exemplifying the thoroughness of Burke’s criticism.

This speech shows Burke inhabiting the realm of propaganda criticism in the style of generative, patient indwelling that he promoted for the practice of propaganda in “Revolutionary Symbolism in America.” In doing so, he is able to translate his positive, practical approach to propaganda as a practice into a critical approach to propaganda. Such an approach would suspend the dismissive style of judgment (keeping alive, as Burke does, a frank acknowledgment of where the “evil” lies), which would enable a wider-eyed view of what rhetorical moves someone like Hitler made, and how and why he made them. That approach leads to what several scholars have called an argument for “critical responsibility.”

“The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” is well known by students of propaganda and students of Burkean rhetoric alike, but scholars interested in Burke’s distinctive approach to propaganda might not be able to glean that approach so fully from this critical capstone. Nor is it fully apparent in his speech at the First Writers’ Congress. The conversations in which Burke was engaged in the years prior to that speech, as well as his reflections on propaganda prompted by its controversial reception, led to some important refinements and directions. These include a turn to attitude, identification, and rhetoric as the way to approach propaganda. That turn to rhetoric, prompted by Burke’s dissatisfaction with social-psychological and “debunking” accounts of propaganda, eventually resulted in a refined and robust critical method, a time-consuming, poetized criticism that forestalled hasty conclusions about how a piece of propaganda—be it a slogan, a headline, a book, or even a painting—works.

Notes

1. Incidentally, 1937 was also the year of the Second American Writers’ Congress. Ann George and Jack Selzer offer a wonderful contextualization of this event (147–151). See also note 10.

2. See, for example, Daniel de Leon’s excoriation of “the policy to bore from within ALONE” (3). Thanks to Jonathan Auerbach for sending along this piece. The phrase Burke uses has a long and interesting history that I do not have time to go into here, but his adoption of it as a positive phrase is in keeping with a number of moves vis-à-vis propaganda (including propaganda itself) that I will discuss in this essay.

3. Indeed, “Revolutionary Symbolism in America” featured perhaps the earliest instance of the term identification published by Burke. Here is that passage:

Reduced to a precept, the formula would run: Let one encompass as many desirable features of our cultural heritage as possible—and let him make sure that his
political alignment figures prominently among them. . . . And I am suggesting that
an approach based upon the positive symbol of "the people," rather than upon the
negative symbol of 'the worker,' makes more naturally for this kind of identification
whereby one's political alignment is fused with broader cultural elements (91; emphasis added).

4. George and Selzer discuss at length how the concepts of inclusion and exclusion helped to
point Burke to the idea of identification (26–27).

5. The other speech that provoked considerable discussion was Edwin Seaver's "The
Proletarian Novel."

6. It ought to be noted that Burke's discussion of the picture and the baby-kissing as implied
sylllogism (and, therefore, an enthymeme) is a unique and early instance of liberally
applying the Aristotelian concepts to visual and bodily/gestural rhetoric.

7. For more on the enthymeme as developed by the ancients, see Walker.

8. It is difficult to know if it is this or some other study Burke was referring to when he
cited Lasswell's work on revolutions in his speech. Intriguingly, though, World Politics
frequently uses the term identification (and the phrase "symbols of identification"),
though identification vanishes from the more popular book that Burke would end up
reviewing.

9. His speech to the Second Writers' Congress also offers a glimpse of him working out
an approach to criticism, and although it does not specifically address propaganda, it
nevertheless ties together his speeches to the First and Second Writers' Congress, especially
with his complaints about critics' reliance on concepts as "shorthand, a shortcut" ("The
Relation between Literature and Science," 167) as opposed to poets, who have a finger on
the pulse of experience (166).

   He sums it up usefully this way:

   There is an old saw, "The longest way round is the shortest way home." Poet and
   critic both, are trying to find 'home,' either an old home or a new one. And critics
do not, unfortunately, have a method that obeys this wise saw. The concept is
shorthand, a short-cut. Concepts can jump the gap between inner circle and outer
circle. Conceptually, one may quickly jump across the gap between capitalism and
communism. But the poet's way is necessarily more cumbersome. It is the longer way
round. It has not got there until it has humanized, personalized. (167)

In the context of his work on propaganda (and the mention of capitalism and communism
suggest that this is how this passage in particular, if not the entire speech, ought to
be read), this passage suggests a need to poeticize criticism, to drag concepts through
the messy ground of the living. The 1937 Writers' Congress speech, then, documents
an important move of Burke's general, integrative approach to propaganda into his
criticism.

10. The line to which I am referring reads as follows: "He knew that the morality of combat is
   no despicable thing, that morals are fists, and that we cannot stop at noting the savagery of
   some slayer or the greed of some financial monopolist" (256).

11. See Pauley, who gives a helpful account of these readings, on his way to a tremendous
contextualization of Burke's speech.
Works Cited


