# PART IV

# Rhetoric and Public Discourse

## Introduction

The Common Goods of Public Discourse

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Any approach to the study of rhetoric is incomplete unless it recognizes the scope and functions of critical practice. Since its inception, rhetorical inquiry has entailed three creative dimensions: the invention and performance of rhetoric, the construction of theoretical principles concerning rhetoric, and the analysis of rhetorical practices. The study of rhetorical objects, most often labeled "rhetorical criticism" in the modern academy, has such a rich history that its full breadth is beyond the scope of this section. Indeed, rhetorical criticism—and especially case-study analysis—has dominated rhetorical inquiry in communication studies. In English studies, rhetorical criticism has assumed different forms; the trajectory of Wayne C. Booth's work, for instance, reflects that range, from the rhetorical criticism of fiction (Booth, 1961, 1983) to an explicitly political and interdisciplinary approach to rhetoric (Booth, 2004). Nevertheless, the analysis of discursive products and practices—as well as instruction in not only academic but also public composition and communication—have shaped the disciplinary histories of English and composition studies as well as that of speech and communication studies (see Connors, 1997; Mailloux, 2006).

Rather than addressing rhetorical criticism in general, this section focuses on historical, critical, and theoretical approaches to public discourse. This focus is intended to narrow the section's content toward studies of rhetorical production that explicitly relate to "the public sphere," variously defined. Public discourse, we argue, is more than a specific area of study in particular disciplines, subdisciplines, and interdisciplines. Public discourse is—and should be—among the

most common of topics. As Chapter 23 by David Zarefsky avers, public discourse is the glue that holds—or fails to hold—a democratic polity together. Consequently, its study and practice place in stark relief the reflexive relationship between academic inquiry and the lived experiences of individuals, communities, and institutions. Robert McChesney (2000) has observed that democracy requires critical publicity, particularly about the media themselves. We make a similar observation about public discourse: To the extent that public discourse is neither studied nor made *topos* for publicity and common concern, our shared worlds suffer.

This introduction first establishes the theoretical and critical warrants for this section and then prepares readers to anticipate the contributions of the chapters that follow. A section devoted to the analysis of public discourse must first establish its exigency by addressing specific conceptual questions. What is "public?" "Public sphere?" "Public discourse?" What are the limitations of various perspectives for examining public discourse? How might the critical habits and practices of different disciplines be compared—and perhaps combined—in scholarship about and through public discourse? This introduction will proceed by addressing each of these questions in turn and concluding with brief summaries of each chapter.

### CONCEPTUAL CLAIMS AND LIMITING ASSUMPTIONS

We draw on two large bodies of criticism and theory to ground this section: public address and publics theory. While the translation into English of Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* in 1989 generated intense scholarly interest in publics and public spheres across the social sciences and humanities, rhetoricians and public address scholars have been conducting critical and theoretical studies of public discourse since the early decades of the 20th century. Generating a shared space for empirical and critical studies of public discourse—particularly given an increasing concern for the sustainability of democracy itself—remains a central and abiding enterprise of rhetorical studies in the early 21st century.

Habermas's (1989) narrative of structural transformation suggests that the bourgeois public sphere grew out of the 18th-century public sphere in the world of letters, where the reading and writing practices of individuals at home—writing letters and reading novels out loud to each other—allowed people to form what he called "audience-oriented subjectivities." That literary public sphere, Habermas argues, was the structural predecessor to the bourgeois public sphere: "The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society" (pp. 30-31). The public sphere, for Habermas, consisted of "public discussion among private individuals" (p. 55), or "private people engaged in public rational-critical debate" (p. 160). While Habermas's account has been roundly and productively critiqued, his seven definitions of "public"—what he describes as a "syndrome of meanings"—are helpful as starting places for this section: (1) "We call events and occasions 'public' when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs—as when we speak of public places or public houses" (p. 1). (2) "'Public buildings' simply house state institutions and as such are 'public." "Public" also describes such occasions when (3) "a powerful display of representation is staged whose 'publicity' contains an element of public recognition" and (4) "when we say someone has made a name for himself, has a public reputation." What Habermas calls the most common usage is (5) "the public as carrier of public opinion; its function as a critical judge is precisely what makes the public character of proceedings—in court, for instance—meaningful." Hence Habermas's final two definitions are (6) "the public sphere itself . . . as a separate domain—the public domain versus the private" and

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(7) "the public . . . simply as that sector of public opinion that happens to be opposed to the authorities." Linguistic differences between German and English enable this "syndrome of meanings" (see also Habermas, 1974).

Then, with a brief citation to Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), Habermas (1989) notes that "notions of what is 'public' and what is not—that is, what is "private"—however, can be traced much further back into the past." Habermas proceeds to distinguish the *polis* and the category of "what is common" (*koine*) from the *oikos* and what is not common, what is particular to each individual (*idia*). He adds that "since the Renaissance this model of the Hellenic public sphere, as handed down to us in the stylized form of Greek self-interpretation, has shared with everything else considered 'classical' a peculiarly normative power" (p. 4). Though Habermas's account historicizes the public sphere in 18th-century Europe and England rather than in Greek antiquity, the normative similarities between Habermas's project and fundamental concerns of speech communication since its inception are clear. Commentators on and criticisms of Habermas are interdisciplinary and legion (e.g., Benhabib, 1993; Berlant, 1997; Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Cvetkovich, 2003; Fraser, 1993; Schudson, 1993; Warner, 2002a, 2002b).

For the purposes of this section, "public discourse" refers to rhetorical processes and products articulated, circulated or performed, deliberated, and rearticulated in the public sphere by private people come together as publics or movements. Whether or not a public sphere exists and whether it serves only the interests of white, bourgeois males are matters of serious and sustained scholarly contention (see, e.g., Goodnight & Hingstman, 1997). We acknowledge these concerns, but believe, with Gerard A. Hauser (1998), that the public sphere does have a particular material expression that implicates social and intellectual histories as well as definable discursive practices. Furthermore, we agree that publics and public spheres—even as counterfactual norms—themselves establish the possibility of democratic processes and practices. We contend that, despite or even perhaps because of its contingent nature, the public sphere perdures—as do the continuously evolving and increasingly threatened practices that warrant its critical relevance.

With Hauser (1998) we posit that the "public sphere" is "a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them. It is the locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meanings" (p. 21). We extend this position by recognizing Michael Warner's (2002a, 2002b) point that the public in the public sphere is organized through its own discursive habits. Furthermore, multiple publics exist at any one time, and sometimes these publics express different interests, competing claims, and diverse rhetorical cultures. A single public provides meaning for adherents not via individual or personal logics alone, but largely through a collaborative and intersubjective rhetoric that simultaneously involves and extends beyond the identity of individuals. Finally, one of the most important dimensions of the public sphere is that its discursive constitution enables alternative expressions that challenge existing norms and, thereby, relational and institutional configurations within the public sphere. Whether or not such challenges can lead to significant political transformation remains a point of scholarly debate (see, e.g., Deem, 2002).

The authors within this section have been encouraged to move beyond what Dilip Gaonkar (2002) argues is the dominant understanding of rhetorical criticism: the critique of political oratory. Our decision to use the terms *public discourse* as well as *public address* indicates our commitment, first, to a broad object domain, and, second, to the interdisciplinary field that is contemporary public discourse studies. When we do use the term public address (see, e.g., Darsey and Ritter below), we do so to indicate a specific and venerable nearly century-old subdiscipline of speech communication studies. Indeed, each chapter in this section considers scholarship that moves beyond public speeches. Laura Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic's chapter, for example, focuses explicitly on studies

of digital rhetoric (Chapter 26), while Stephen Browne's survey of research on the U.S. Revolution and early Republic juxtaposes sermons with public letters and visual icons (Chapter 27). Each author in this section also has tried to include work that cuts across English and communication studies, and, in some cases, across political science, American studies, and gender studies. Angela Ray (Chapter 28), for example, performed a systematic survey of interdisciplinary journals and university presses to identify trends in the study of late 19th-century public discourse.

It is important, however, to recognize the limits of this section: it certainly does not cover the totality of public discourse or social movement scholarship, nor does it dwell on public memory (see, e.g., Browne, 1995; Phillips, 2004), public scholarship (see, e.g., Eberly & Cohen, 2004), public intellectuals (see, e.g., Hauser, 2006), or public culture more widely. Some will agree with Gaonkar (2002) that the broadening scope of rhetorical objects and the pluralism in methods evinced in this section have not led to conceptually dense and innovative theory (p. 411). Indeed, the research discussed in this section is mostly case oriented. Yet while the editors believe that future scholarship in rhetorical studies must combine the act of criticism with more robust theoretical development, public discourse studies has begun to consider situated practices longitudinally, comparatively, and transhistorically (see Jasinski, 2001, pp. 136–141). Others will recognize a bias toward rhetoric from the United States, on discourses of elites rather than subalterns, and on the habits and practices of communication studies rather than interdisciplinary rhetoric or composition studies. Despite our belief that transnational analysis (see Medhurst, 2001, p. 508) and interdisciplinary collaboration are the future of public discourse studies, the past is dominated by Anglo-American work, and, until recently, by one discipline. Steven Mailloux's (2006) history of English and speech communication explains how and why a certain type of rhetorical criticism flourished in speech but not in English departments. Mailloux contends that rhetoric played only a minor, background role in English until the 1960s when the work of Thomas Kuhn, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Chaim Perelman, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca provided a theoretical vocabulary and renewed pedagogical functions for rhetorical study (pp. 16–26). Wayne Booth (2001) complicates and extends Mailloux's characterization:

According to the broader definitions of rhetoric—not mere oratory or argument but all modes of persuasion—literary critics have never been able to avoid practicing some form of rhetorical criticism. According to narrower and more popular definitions, however, rhetoric had almost completely disappeared from the literary scene by the end of the eighteenth century. (p. 182; see also Clark & Halloran, 1993)

For both pragmatic and historical reasons, then, this section's editors have chosen a narrow conceptualization of rhetorical criticism. Put differently, we perceive the origins of public discourse studies as generally concerning the study of speeches rather than literature; although this research has fortunately evolved beyond the oral tradition, its oratorical origins have shaped its intellectual history in unavoidable ways. We contend that the most expeditious way to proceed is to focus on scholarship that self-consciously travels under the signs of rhetorical studies, public address or public discourse studies, or social movement rhetoric. Given this approach, the work of scholars in communication studies plays a significant role in this section.

### **SECTION ORGANIZATION**

This section is divided into two subsections. In the first, we asked authors to address the section title from theoretical, disciplinary, and interdisciplinary points of departure. The first two chapters, for example, work through the same history to offer related yet distinct narratives about the

evolution of public discourse studies from the early 20th century onward. Read together, the Chapter 23 by Zarefsky and Chapter 24 by Campbell and Keremidchieva present a robust account of how the study of public discourse, while always concerned with issues of deliberation, democracy, and public policy, also struggled with issues of equity, identity, and difference. Chapter 25 by Hauser and Hedgbloom theorizes a rapproachment between rhetoric and critical theory through public discourse and deliberation, while Chapter 26 by Laura Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic reflects on the social, political, and discursive transformations brought about by digital technology.

For the second subsection, we asked authors to address specific discourse practices, focusing on kinds of public discourse or delineated periods of practice. The goal throughout the section is to present a state-of-the-art view of work in rhetorical studies and then to argue for how scholars of rhetoric might best address understudied areas. Three chapters examine the historical periods that are most often the focus of intellectual scrutiny: The U.S. Revolution and early Republic (Chapter 27 by Stephen Browne), 1860 to 1900 (Chapter 28 by Angela Ray), and the first half of the 20th century (Chapter 29 by Thomas Benson). In each instance, the author has analyzed an enormous amount of literature. That said, omissions are inevitable. Most particularly, the editors did not commission essays that addressed 1830 to 1860 or 1950 to 2007. This is not to suggest that research about these periods is absent from the section, however. Studies of these periods appear in three topically oriented chapters: Darsey and Ritter's study of U.S. religious rhetoric (Chapter 30), Cox and Foust's review of social movement studies (Chapter 32), and Beasley's consideration of contemporary political rhetoric (Chapter 31). By combining chapters that focus explicitly on three often-studied historical periods and three broader themes, this subsection demonstrates both the breadth and diversity of public discourse studies. It not only speaks to our enduring concerns, but it also identifies the field's historic strengths and opportunities for future growth.

#### **CHAPTER SUMMARIES**

## David Zarefsky, "History of Public Discourse Studies"

Zarefsky defines public discourse studies as the analysis of situated moments of rhetorical practice. In the 19th century, claims Zarefsky, rhetoric sustained public interest because of its presumed connection to historically significant events and its inherent artistry. Speech anthologies were published and purchased, facilitating the growth of academic research and a stable mode of inquiry Zarefsky terms the "rhetorical biography." Studies of great orators and their rhetoric, he explains, served the theoretical and pedagogical needs of young speech departments well into the 1950s, when new rhetoric scholars, social scientists, rhetoric instructors, and movement scholars began to question the rhetorical biography's efficacy. According to Zarefsky, 1965 marks the tipping point when the largely homogeneous study of public discourse fragmented into an increasingly pluralistic set of methods, perspectives, and paradigms. Although Zarefsky notes the enormous benefits that plurality has provided, he concludes with a challenge: Can public discourse studies survive as a coherent and identifiable subfield in the face of so much contemporary diversity?

# Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Zornitsa D. Keremidchieva, "Race, Sex, and Class in Rhetorical Criticism"

Campbell and Keremidchieva extend and complicate Zarefsky's narrative by arguing that the rhetorical biographies that comprised the first stage of public discourse research aligned critical practice with "the interests of cultural establishments, political power, and the value of social cohesion." The impulse to legitimize criticism in established forms of traditional authority was

ironic, they contend, because these same scholars were marked by difference and felt marginalized in departments of English. Campbell and Keremidchieva highlight this irony by interpreting the performance of rhetorical criticism as a regular cycle of recognizing and incorporating difference within a generally conservative framework of intellectual inquiry. Only in the last decade, they conclude, have scholars of public discourse begun to understand difference as productive, as a process of identity construction that need not be identified with Anglo-American masculinity.

# Gerard A. Hauser and Maria T. Hegbloom, "Rhetoric and Critical Theory: Possibilities for Rapprochement in Public Deliberation"

Hauser and Hegbloom explore the prospects for a theoretical accommodation between rhetoric and critical theory in a milieu of fragmentation and assess the realistic possibilities for such an accommodation to address the challenges facing public deliberation. They argue that the prevailing politics of rational choice, with its instrumental focus on personal gain, undermines democratic action, while public deliberation, with its discursive focus on the public good, offers a competing model that seeks to recuperate democratic action. They contend that a rapprochement between Habermas's construction of critical theory and a rhetorical understanding of public deliberation offers a possibility for refiguring public deliberation in a way capable of addressing relations of mutual dependency in a world of increasing cultural and ideological fragmentation.

### Laura J. Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic, "Digital Rhetoric and Public Discourse"

Gurak and Antonijevic begin their chapter with a statement that is accurate, yet challenging: "We have reached a time where the phrase 'digital rhetoric' is redundant." Their chapter proceeds by detailing the ubiquitous presence of technology not only in rhetoric's current production but also in its historical preservation. They establish, further, how studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) evolved into the robust field of Internet studies. Unfortunately, their literature review indicates that while scholars occasionally consider technology as a means of rhetoric's distribution, there are few studies that consider the "rhetorical dynamics of the case study's digital component to help explain the rest of the case." What is needed, they argue, is a recognition that digitized forms of public discourse are shaped by a different canon—speed, reach, anonymity, interactivity, *kairos*, and collaborative community. The traditional rhetorical canon is still relevant, but they conclude that the new canon must be incorporated into our research if public discourse analysis is going to account for the majority of rhetoric produced in the 21st century.

### Stephen Howard Browne, "Arts of Address in Revolutionary America"

Browne investigates how students of rhetoric have and might best continue "to offer their distinctive insights to the growing body of work on the nation's founding" and early history. The chapter offers an overview of resources and then discusses and performs the state of the art in rhetorical criticism where rhetorical studies of this period might best focus. Browne argues for revitalized interest in rhetorical form—defined as modes of address that function in distinctive but not exclusive manners. The chapter focuses on three genres: the sermon, the public letter, and the visual icon. The sermon, Browne argues, functions as oral critique; the public letter as community formation; and the visual icon as instilling the drama of resistance into public memory. Though genre studies may have fallen on hard times, Browne argues that scholars of rhetoric who want to focus on this period would do well to help revitalize studies of rhetorical forms.

# Angela G. Ray, "Explosive Words and Glimmers of Hope: U.S. Public Discourse From 1860 to 1900"

Ray's chapter balances a reflexive appreciation of her own professional evolution within public discourse studies and a systematic survey of journals and presses that publish 19th-century rhetorical criticism. The personal perspective she brings to bear on this literature not only establishes an organizational structure for the enormous amount of literature she identifies, it also provides unique insights into both the strengths and weaknesses of 1860–1900 public discourse research. She notes, for example, that the scholarship seems to gravitate toward rhetoric that is either emotionally transformative or symbolic of large social conflict, or both simultaneously. While this has led to a great deal of exciting and progressive work on the late 19th century, especially in the analysis of marginalized voices, it may also explain the surprising absence of studies that consider economic development, "particularly relations of labor and capital" during the Gilded Age.

# Thomas W. Benson, "For the Common Good: Rhetoric and Discourse Practices in the United States, 1900–1950"

Benson opens his chapter, a systematic review of interdisciplinary work on this period, by reflecting on similarities between "the turbulent first half of the 20th century" and the present. For instance, studies of the progressive and new deal eras, he writes,

seem to have taken on a new urgency and edge . . . as key administration leaders openly announce their ambition to repeal the New Deal; some even boast of returning to an America that existed before the reforms of the Progressive Era.

Benson argues that while public address studies is "thriving," it remains focused on the lives and texts of various elites:

Implicitly, our discipline celebrates public rhetoric that is discursive, democratic, decisive, deliberative, and diverse. In practice, no subset of the discipline has cultivated a full historical account of the public practices that might meet such an ideal, nor even a coherent history of the various practices that act as substitutes, deferrals, approximations, or corruptions of such practices.

Benson concludes that, despite the quality and quantity of scholarship, "the rhetorical agendas of the period are unfinished, and our scholarship is painfully incomplete."

### James Darsey and Joshua R. Ritter, "Religious Voices in American Public Discourse"

In their survey of scholarship on religious public discourse in the United States, Darsey and Ritter describe existing work "as a mass of tessera waiting to be assembled into a mosaic, wanting an inventory of the missing pieces." Though focusing on public address scholarship, they address interdisciplinary literatures as well,

in an effort to piece together something of the story of religious rhetoric in the United States, to provide a sense of its parameters and its trajectory, and to identify opportunities for rhetorical scholars to extend our understandings of this fundamental of American public discourse.

The chapter is structured both chronologically and topically; it features new rhetorical criticism on Jonathan Edwards "Sinners" as representative anecdote; and it culminates by weighing

in on controversies surrounding a fifth great awakening and postmodernity. "Only by suggesting the essential coherence of the story," write Darsey and Ritter

can we make a compelling case that the study of religious discourses in the United States ought to be more than a sideshow, a rare look at what are too often imagined as rhetorical oddities at the margins of public life, removed from the realm of reason and evidentiary obligations.

# Vanessa B. Beasley, "Between Touchstones and Touch Screens: What Counts as Contemporary Political Rhetoric"

Beasley addresses the strange paradox that although, in public opinion, the quality of U.S. political rhetoric has declined, its study has never been more robust. The study of political communication is so widespread, she argues, that two distinct subfields have developed within the academy. The first and oldest is represented by the "public address" tradition and is most often located in speech and communication departments. The second subfield is more frequently characterized by its method than through a consistently applied label; it involves the social scientific analysis of political communication's effects. Although the two subfields have existed for almost 30 years, Beasley argues that new media innovations are beginning to transform the practice and study of political rhetoric, perhaps even complicating distinctions between the two subfields. In particular, she notes that "visual rhetorics," photography, film, television imagery, and Internet video have become essential components of political communication and its study. She anticipates that as the impact of digitized media is better recognized, scholars may find themselves in new territory as they struggle to understand the changing terrain of contemporary political rhetoric.

## Robert Cox and Christina R. Foust, "Social Movement Rhetoric"

Perhaps more than any other kind of work in rhetorical studies, scholarship on social movements has embraced critical and theoretical pluralism and moved from studies of individual leaders, individual texts, and individual movements into wider studies of social change. Cox and Foust argue that studies of social movements have themselves "broadened rhetorical theory and criticism by bringing uninstitutionalized, nonnormative, and incongruous voices into conversation with public discourse scholarship." The chapter reviews five major trajectories in scholarship on social movement rhetoric (SMR): early studies; refigurations of social movements into "new social movements" and counterpublics; resistance performed by bodies, through images, and on public screens; democracy, representation, and new modalities of social dissent; and continuing challenges for social movement scholarship. Cox and Foust conclude their chapter and, appropriately, this section by articulating rhetoric with the question of efficacy:

In the end, we believe, a robust theory of the efficacy or impact of rhetorical acts in oppositional struggles holds the greatest promise for continued development and contribution of SMR scholarship. For beyond simple accounts of "resistance" lies the possibility of understanding the relationships among discursive acts, power, and the sources of social and political transformation.

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