

Preface

Streets, Rhetoric and Revolution!

Rhetoric for Radicals is about changing the world. Specifically, it's about changing the world through human communication. This may seem simplistic, but I will argue otherwise. Communication is the basis of the world and the basis of human reality. Subtracting communication from our lives leaves only cold, hard, disconnected things; facts without feeling; a world devoid of human life. But we do have communication and we do have a world — a world worth fighting over and changing for the better. As we change our communication, we change our world. But to do this we need to be smart and strategic; we need to think about our languages, statements, styles, actions, and overall communicative effects. This involves rhetoric. For now, we can define rhetoric as conscientiously crafted communication for the achievement of social and political ends. This may seem basic enough, but it is actually very complex. We often think of communication as a basic exchange of information. Two people talk to one another, exchange information and then go about their business. This common understanding of communication woefully limits our political effectiveness. The *way* we communicate influences and can even determine our thoughts, understanding of and perceptions of the thing we're talking about. This is even truer when talking about — *and actually doing* — politics, social change, resistance and revolution.

Let's consider direct action and civil disobedience. Every action involves multiple modes of communication. All the participants must communicate in order to coordinate the action. The action then communicates outward to whoever will watch and listen. The action could be geared toward a very specific audience or created for the whole world. In either case, there is an intended audience. People

have been spending days, weeks, or even months planning the action. They've created or updated websites and blogs; written and designed texts, posters and fliers; reached people through e-mails and cell phones; and contacted particular news media. The purpose, location, message and intended effect have been debated and discussed. Communication is present in every phase of this action.

It's almost inevitable that the participants of the action will eventually stand face-to-face with riot police. This might involve negotiation, argumentation or persuasion; or physical interaction with either silence and limp bodies, or chained arms, lockboxes, shouts, refusals and strained bodies. The police will most likely disrupt and disperse the action. Some activists will get free and others will be arrested. Those who escape will go tell their friends and write up e-mails and online posts while those being arrested are probably being handcuffed and dragged along the pavement.

If you're being arrested, you're probably telling the cops that you're not a criminal but rather a conscientious objector; that you're not breaking the law but rather refusing to comply with unjust laws; that you're doing this not for personal gain but for the improvement of the shared social world. The arresting officer then says that he is just doing his job; that he doesn't care about your motives or reasons; that you are aware of your actions and the consequences; and that you can make your case before an impartial judge. This example obviously involves the exchange of information, but many other things are involved too.

During the interaction, you and the officer try to control the situation by carefully choosing your words. You refer to yourself as an activist, civil disobedient, radical, and even revolutionary while he calls you a criminal. He refers to himself as a server and protector of the law while you call him a Robo Cop or Storm Trooper. He then gets upset and fires back, calling you clueless and ignorant. All of these descriptions are accurate to some degree, and that's due to the nature of language. Words are never neutral arbiters of reality; there's no such thing. Everyone knows this already, at least intuitively. This gives us free license to use language to shape people's understanding. You and the officer thus play rhetorical games by legitimizing your

own actions through words and linguistic frames. This example is awfully mild, of course. Real life situations are often intense, chaotic, vicious and even violent. We yell, shout and sling expletives back and forth. We try to get into each others' minds and inflict psychological harm and damage one another's ideologies. These situations aren't pretty, but they commonly occur during mass actions and mobilizations.

At a later point you and the arresting officer might take turns talking and listening to each other. Most likely, you're explaining the importance of radical social change while he nods his head and avoids eye contact. He might even be completely silent, but his silence is *not* non-communicative. In fact, his silence communicates his "professional distance" from the situation, as if his personal feelings are not there. He wants to make the arrest in his professional role instead of as a real person. You, too, might remain silent, but for different reasons. On one level, it's for legal protection, in the sense of having the right to remain silent. But on another level, silence can express your resistance. You're refusing any and all questions and providing no name, address, political affiliation or purpose of your action. You're using your silence to send a small but effective message: you're neither complying with nor obeying the rules of the land. Your silence is suddenly loud, persuasive, strategically powerful and very communicative. In other words, it's rhetorical.

Body language and nonverbal communication are also major factors here. The police officer's upright stance and hyper-confidence clearly mark his arresting intentions. You're also exuding confidence, but differently so. Your legs kick and fight and your heels dig into every little crack or crevice. You're not going down without a fight. This is all great, but it's not your only option for responding. You could go completely limp and lay there utterly uncooperative, forcing them to carry you away. In either case you are communicating refusal. You're obviously being arrested and you've decided to make the cops do all the work. This power reversal is an act of your embodied communication. You're using your body to communicate your resistance.

Other activists, either those from across the street or those still engaged in the action, begin cheering. No actual words are spoken,

just many sounds of solidarity. The cheers continue as you're pulled onto the bus which is your makeshift holding cell. Thirty, forty, maybe sixty activists sit there, hands cuffed behind their backs. This isn't fun. Really, it's not. But there's a strange vibe on the bus. You're not entirely sure why, but you know in your heart that you have *communicated* something. You've made it clear that you're not giving up, caving in or bending to the whims of a perverse society. You are free and fighting, even in your precarious state of arrest. There will be other fights and eventually you will win. It's only a matter of time.

This extended example highlights some basic structures of rhetoric. For instance, there is always a communicator, an audience, a message and a surrounding situation. There's also a constant loop of interaction between you and your audience, a desire to accomplish some type of political goal or action, and some medium of expression. Sometimes you are the communicator, other times you are the audience member. Sometimes you send messages, other times you respond to messages. You're constantly living in a situation, but that situation is always shifting, forcing you to adjust and adapt. Your political desires push and pull you towards different goals and actions. And this process unfolds through languages, actions, gestures and even collective vibrations. All of this is the domain of rhetoric.

The example also highlights the interchange between activists and society at large. Activists are full-time communicators standing on public stages and broadcasting messages. Each action contributes to the wider world, and the particular message of each action creates a slightly different effect. You might kick and scream, but you might also walk and sing or talk and negotiate. Each of these choices carries a different message and a different effect. Most activists realize this already, which explains why activists debate the look and feel of direct actions, discuss particular slogans and chants, and choose certain symbols. This is great, but it's not enough. You want to address these things *rhetorically*, which will improve your radicalism. It will help you appeal to wider publics, help you create more effective messages and actions and help you create forms of activism suitable for the twenty-first century. That's what activism, organizing and

radicalism are all about: communicating with others in order to create a better world. That's the whole purpose of *Rhetoric for Radicals*.

Overview

This book is written for activists who seek a decentered, anti-authoritarian, radically democratic world. This doesn't mean that you have to be a militant or a direct actionist to appreciate this book. Many radical activists do not consider themselves militants or direct actionists in any way, shape or form. But these activists are willing to walk toward their own visions of a better world and that's what makes them radical. If you're willing to follow your heart and walk toward your own radical desires, then this book is for you.

My own desires are influenced by my activism, which began in the spring of 2000 with the global justice movement. I happened to be watching the evening news and caught the coverage of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund protests in Washington, DC. Something hit me in that moment and I suddenly realized that I needed to be out there in the world, trying to change things for the better. I started doing activist work soon after. Since then I have worked on free trade and fair trade issues, anti-war campaigns, anti-Republican National Convention protests and Latin American solidarity actions. I have organized, facilitated and led various workshops on communication, rhetoric and radical theory at activist conferences, local bookstores and community free spaces. I also traveled with a New York City delegation of activists to observe and report on Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution. This experience was life changing. Seeing the Bolivarian Revolution in process made me believe that revolution is both possible and necessary. Such experiences, coupled with my academic trainings and teachings in communication studies, have motivated me to write a handbook for radical activists and organizers.

This book is different from other how-to manuals. Plenty of great books already tackle the strategic ins-and-outs of hands-on organizing and activism. To name just a few: Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* (1971); Kim Bobo, Jacki Kendall and Steve Max's *Organizing for Social Change* (1996); Randy Shaw's *The Activist's Handbook*

(2001); United For a Fair Economy's *The Global Activist's Manual* (2002); Michael Albert's *Trajectory of Change* (2002); and for more directly subversive tactics, CrimethInc.'s *Recipes for Disaster* (2005). But *Rhetoric for Radicals* is different. It approaches activism as a rhetorical issue and argues that effective radicalism must involve sound rhetorical practice. Most if not all of us are aware of this to a certain degree. But this book asks us to go beyond mere awareness and actually approach activism as a *rhetorical labor*.

Rhetoric for Radicals is not completely alone in this call. Some works by George Lakoff — particularly *Don't Think Like an Elephant!* (2004) and *Thinking Points* (2006) — address the intersections of communication and activism. So too does Stephen Duncombe's *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in the Age of Fantasy* (2007). But there are some key differences. Lakoff is writing for liberal Democrats while I am writing for radicals. And Duncombe outlines reasons why activists should use spectacle-like communication while I provide hands-on instructions for improving activists' communication. To that end, I invite you to become a radical rhetorician capable of manifesting alternative worlds of communicative experience. Here's the underlying logic:

- ✦ Change the rhetoric and you change the communication.
- ✦ Change the communication and you change the experience.
- ✦ Change the experience and you change a person's orientation to the world.
- ✦ Change that orientation and you create conditions for profound social change.

This logic is less about what you say and do and more about *rhetorically crafting* what you say and do. I firmly believe that we can say whatever we want. But the trick is finding the right words, the right tone, the right approach, the right rhetoric.

I am not asking you to put up a false front. I would never endorse such a thing. But if we're going to talk about resistance, rebellion and revolution, then we need to talk about them in ways that attract rather than alienate people. There's no honor or glory in bad communication; it simply leaves us alone, isolated and severed from

the channels of social change. We obviously want the opposite; improving our rhetorical communication can only help us. And just as our activism changes with the times, so too must our rhetorical considerations and responses. Our post-9/11, globalized and networked era poses unique challenges to social change. *Rhetoric for Radicals* addresses those challenges by providing guidelines, insights, theories, tools, and suggestions for twenty-first century activists.

This brings up an important question. What do I mean by twenty-first century activism? I have two partial answers. The first is historical and the second is intuitive.

Like I said above, the global justice movement was my entry into activism. While I love and appreciate all that I have learned from that movement, its time has passed. Take, for instance, the famous Battle of Seattle. That historical event occurred at the very end of 1999 and marked not the beginning but definitely a flourishing of the global justice movement. That “movement of movements” gathered fierce momentum over the next two years. Mass mobilizations, direct actions, participatory democracies, horizontal communities and feelings of urgency spread like wildfire. Then something happened: September 11, 2001. In the wake of 9/11, our focus shifted away from global capital in general and to the United States’ empire in particular. A US anti-war movement soon emerged. That movement has been effective at times. For instance, on February 15, 2003, somewhere between 10 and 30 million people across the world expressed their outrage against a possible invasion of Iraq. And just before the war began hundreds of thousands of people were committing direct actions throughout the US. This was impressive and inspiring, but generally speaking, the anti-war movement has been too concerned with the slow process of lobbying politicians who were responsible for the war. Lobbying is important, but the anti-war movement has rarely addressed the roots of the problem: nationalism, capitalism, empire, a corrupt two-party system and people’s acquiescence toward the Iraq war and the Bush Administration’s supposed “war on terror.” The few months leading up to the actual invasion of Iraq seemed to be riding the wave of the pre-9/11 global justice movement. But that pre-9/11 radicalism waned once the war started.

Looking at the pre- to post-9/11 transition this way is perplexing for one very basic reason: global justice activists are still here; we didn't disappear and we didn't go anywhere else. We're still active, still working and still striving for *global* change. We continue to organize and participate in mass mobilizations, counter summits, no-border camps, world social forums, transnational alliances, cross-cultural solidarities, and all kinds of globally networked actions and movements. But the name, "global justice movement," now seems outdated; it seems marked by the past rather than the edge of the present. Its time, however exciting it was, is gone. We are thus forced to move forward even as we search for new themes, names, identities, slogans, languages and *rhetorics*. This book is written during this *passee*. Hence the book's subtitle: *A Handbook for Twenty-first Century Activists*.

I must admit, though, that I am not entirely clear on the meaning of the phrase "twenty-first century activist." I have only a faint feeling, a murky intuition and a cloudy vision. And my vision may be influenced more by a creative imagination than a concrete analysis. But maybe that's not so bad. Imagination helps us surpass moments of impasse and times of indecision. Imagination helps us think beyond the old, stale, crusty thoughts of a decadent society. Imagination helps us dream and desire. My own imagination draws me to the nature of this book: issues of communication and rhetoric. Twenty-first century activists are — or will become — the rhetors of the future. We will translate ideas into actions and communicate visions into realities. We will create worlds so common that we are all included and worlds so unique that we are all inspired. That's activism of the future that must begin today.

We have already glimpsed precedents of the twenty-first century. The Zapatistas are a prime example. Their 1994 uprising was a rhetorical phenomenon. They used the emerging media of the day to create tangible images of their inclusive, non-ideological politics: Zapatismo. The Internet became a revolutionary tool and the word became a weapon. Their stories, poems and communiqués created a political imagination of thought, feeling and action. They created a political perception. Not a fake, phony or erroneous "take on reality,"

but rather a concrete but open reality of accessibility, solidarity, criticality and self-and-collective determination. The Zapatistas invited us to participate in this ongoing communicative creation and to partake in this rhetorical formation.

While the Zapatistas are a prime predecessor of twenty-first century radicalism, they are not alone. Other groups, movements and actions pave the way for our future politics: Ya Basta! and Disobedienti; Black Blocs, Green Blocs and Pink Blocs; Reclaim the Streets, Critical Mass, Times Up!, and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army; festivals of resistance, parades of life and prefigurative celebrations; anarchists, autonomists, cyber-Marxists and do-it-yourselfers; antiracist workers, militant researchers and activist philosophers; radical cheerleaders, feminist virtuosos, queer knitters and undercover lovers gardening in the dark of night; and of course all the drums, puppets, masquerades, slogans, chants, dances, styles, colors, words, actions and images! Many of us have walked toward this future — a future where we will create unforeseen worlds and materialize uncharted realities. We will achieve the unachievable and we will create the unimaginable. This will become our communication; this will become our rhetoric; this will become our revolutionary change.

Preview

Chapter One takes up this revolutionary call by situating rhetoric as a *communicative labor*. Rhetoric is no doubt an ongoing and ever-present process, but good rhetoric is labor intensive. It takes time, thought and energy. Bypassing this labor has created a *communicative gap* between our actions and the public's reception of those actions. Simply put, our radicalism suffers from a rhetorical crisis. But all is not lost. As this book argues, we can improve our rhetoric and move beyond this crisis. This mending process begins with a conceptual overview of rhetoric for radicals. The chapter provides three different but related definitions of rhetoric, situates rhetoric at the center of social change, connects rhetorical practice to activism and organizing and asks us to approach our activism through the lens of rhetoric. Activism, as the conscious act of changing society, is

inherently rhetorical. Political campaigns, social movements, direct actions, demonstrations, rallies and parades of resistance are rhetorical constructions. But Chapter One goes deeper and argues that *all human realities are rhetorically constructed*. Such a framework depicts the world as a pliable process and our activism as a communicative labor for recreating realities. If this is true, then our activism isn't about changing but about creating the world. This insight is foundational to rhetoric for radicals.

Chapter Two is a hands-on chapter, providing plenty of guidelines and suggestions for developing your rhetorical skills. It begins by addressing the two most basic skills: public speaking and writing. These skills, while not what everyone wants or needs, easily transfer to other activist-related issues, e.g., designing websites, running public campaigns, creating T-shirt and poster images, developing visual art, petitioning on street corners and having everyday conversations. In each case we need to develop a clear message that can be effectively communicated to other people. This chapter tackles that concern head-on. The chapter also provides instructions for creating a rhetorical package, which includes a message, audience, strategy, goal and situation. The chapter then addresses different rhetorical approaches, like persuasion, argumentation, storytelling and invitational rhetoric. Understanding how to use these approaches is important, but we must also develop our rhetorical knowledge. This involves using current events, history and self-knowledge to your rhetorical advantage. Chapter Two provides a solid starting point for improving your communication skills, your rhetorical skills and your rhetorical knowledge.

Chapter Three discusses the power of language, particularly how language shapes people's perceptions and understanding. Mainstream media, political strategists and advertising and marketing agencies understand this all too well. Activists need to take heed and consciously consider the wording of every slogan, sentence and demand. Language, thus understood, becomes a tool for radical social change. Deploying the right language can mean the difference between success and failure. This chapter helps you understand how language shapes people's views, how it is used and abused, how it

relates to issues of self-identity and propaganda, how to appreciate political correctness without being stifled by it, and how to utilize the rhetorical power of new words and languages. By the end, you'll understand how language not only shapes consciousness, but also, and more profoundly, how it shapes reality. You'll see how changing your language helps change the world.

Chapter Four expands the scope of rhetoric by addressing body rhetoric. At the very least, body rhetoric involves the look, feel and style of your physical gestures, the messages of your nonverbal communication and the meanings and effects of your bodily actions. And just as you can improve your verbal rhetoric, you can also improve your body rhetoric. Since your body is the site of your everyday living, you can cultivate it into a site of radical activity and rhetorical engagement. Chapter Four helps you accomplish that by looking at three things: embodied argumentation, rhetorical style and the human vibe as bodily emanation. The chapter provides examples of and guidelines for improving these forms of rhetoric.

Chapter Five, the last chapter, summarizes and extends the purpose of the entire book: it provides guidelines for building twenty-first century radical rhetoric. The chapter begins with ten observations of contemporary activist rhetoric. Understanding our current actions helps pave the way for future actions. The chapter then discusses "network rhetoric," which is a paradigmatic figure of today's activism. We discuss some examples of network rhetoric and then ways to improve as well as move beyond this rhetorical form. The chapter ends by proposing a new approach to radical thought and action. This approach, called *neo-radicalism*, sets forth a new orientation toward activism that is based on the immaterial and communicative labors of the twenty-first century. Neo-radicalism is a rhetorically-centered activism that encapsulates the nature and purpose of *Rhetoric for Radicals*.

Before closing this preface, I want to lay my motivations on the table. I could easily sit here and write how I am simply trying to make a small contribution, how I am just trying to do my part and how I hope this book will make a tiny ripple in public affairs. All this is true, but only to a degree. Above all, I hope this book starts

a revolution. Do I think that will actually happen? Do I think that this book *will* start a revolution? I'm not sure, but my uncertainty doesn't stop me from dreaming and trying. Occupying intersections does not necessarily stop a war. Lying down in front of bulldozers does not necessarily stop apartheid. And shutting down the World Trade Organization does not necessarily stop corporate globalization. But we commit these actions anyway because the uncertainty of their outcomes is better than the certainty of nothing. I am no different. I am trying to change the world and I am doing it through the uncertainties of writing a book. At times I will give suggestions. At times I will make critiques. At times I will say things that you completely disagree with. Okay, fine. Let's talk, debate, discuss, and expand the ideas of this book. Then, together, we can move toward a revolution.

But let's also recognize the gravity of this discussion. We can have provocative debates about changing the system. We can talk about past revolutions and their implications for today. And we can dream and romanticize our radicalism. But some real questions soon slap us in the face. Is revolution actually possible today? Is revolution possible within the United States of America? Is it even sensible to talk about the possibility of revolution? Are we just crazy? Are we out of touch with the times and conditions? The answers to these questions depend on what we mean by revolution. A physical, militant or violent revolution seems foolish. We could not amass enough people with enough violent technology to overthrow the current order. It's simply not possible. The US power structure is armed to the teeth with deadly force. A couple of Apache helicopters could wipe out entire towns within minutes. I don't think this is what we envision or imagine. And I don't think this is a sensible way to a better society or world. We are thus confronted by another impasse, or at least seemingly so. We need a different path to revolution. I believe that rhetorical labor fulfills that need. Rhetoric is not the be-all and end-all for social change and *Rhetoric for Radicals* is not a blueprint for revolution. But rhetoric is a necessary component and this book can help us move in that direction. With that in mind, I say to everyone: *Radical rhetors of the world, unite!*