

# Activism and Rhetoric

## Theories and Contexts for Political Engagement

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### 3 The Work of a Middle-Class Activist Stuck in History

*Charles Bazerman*

I was born in 1945, midway between VE and VJ day. As I was growing up into political consciousness in the 1950s, it was easy not to like parts of the world I saw around me. After all, I was an adolescent. It was also easy to take for granted all that my suburban life offered me. After all, I was an adolescent. What was not easy was to put the two together. Looking back from this strange moment at the beginning of 2005, when history seemed to be going awry, some of the choices I made feel dangerously exposed and frayed. In the following morality tale, or rather tale in pursuit of morality, I will present the issues as they appeared to me at the time, filled with the limitations, contradictions, and struggles of trying to make sense of the world as I went through it, making what limited choices life handed me.

Both my parents had known real hardship and injustice, immigrating with their families from the pogroms and famines of Eastern Europe to the poverty of Brooklyn tenements just after the First World War. They both came into adulthood during the Great Depression. One of my grandfathers was a sweatshop tailor, with a sewing machine in the living room to do piecework. My mother nostalgically sang me picket songs: “The Shirtmakers’ Union is a no good union, it’s a company union by the bosses. ... Dubinsky is our leader, we shall not be moved. ... ” David Dubinsky was president of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) from 1932 to 1966. My parents met at the Young Communist League and courted at party picnics. My father nearly was expelled from City College for organizing a fair to raise money for the Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. It was clear what not to like in their world, and clear where the remedies lay if you were young, Jewish, working class in Depression-era New York. Struggling against injustice was struggling directly for the interests of yourself, your family, and friends.

There was another set of remedies, individual remedies, to protect yourself against injustice. So the college my father nearly got kicked out of, but graduated *magna cum laude* from, was a business school—the downtown branch of City College, later to become Bernard M. Baruch College. By the time I knew my parents, their membership in socialist organizations had lapsed, and my father was a storm window salesman, eventually to become partner in a small manufacturing company. When I was five we moved from Brooklyn to

the post-war suburbs and my father drove us around in his Oldsmobile, then a black Cadillac with legendary tailfins. On Saturdays he brought me with him to work so I could earn spending money by packing hardware for door installation kits. I felt a tinge of fear that if instead of being the boss's son I were to become one of the minimum-wage hourly workers on the noisy and dangerous drill presses and fabricating machines.

So I learned the lessons of class from the top side. Even as my parents divorced, and my father went bankrupt trying to become a stock broker, then at age forty-eight died of a heart attack, I still benefited from post-Sputnik enrichment programs targeted at the middle class, hobnobbed with academically successful kids, graduated near the top of my suburban high school, and went on to the Ivy League—though needing help from scholarships and social security. My brother (who became a patent attorney) and I never doubted we belonged to the comfortable middle class from which we would meritocratically make our way (though anxious about how easy it would be to fall into the victimized classes). The sociopolitical remedies our parents sought had gotten no further than New Deal bottom-slung safety nets, but individual remedies had brought their children up to the professional classes.

Nonetheless, the social and political problems remained for me to notice as I grew up on the quiet streets of Long Island. Television brought the McCarthy hearings and the investigations of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, Edward R. Murrow exposés, and school desegregation confrontations. While Eleanor Roosevelt told us to light candles, newspapers brought ground-zero target maps of the New York metropolitan area, and school brought duck-and-cover drills. My father's brokerage company underwrote the stock offering of a fallout-shelter producer. Even Broadway musicals brought critiques of racism, class exploitation, militarism, and international animosity; off-Broadway productions of Brecht brought a great deal more. Enrichment programs brought me into Manhattan where newsstands sold me left-wing magazines not found in Bellmore.

The world clearly needed to be made a better place. I declared my allegiance by pasting SANE cartoons on the school walls during bomb drills, writing history papers on Marx, English papers on Lorraine Hansberry and Mark Twain (safe beginnings), then Langston Hughes and Bertolt Brecht. I wrote a paper on the psychological and social consequences of nuclear devastation. I joined civil rights picket lines around local restaurants and bused to Washington for marches. I listened to lots of folk music.

But the biggest gesture toward humanity was to commit myself to science, because we all knew that scientists were morally pure, rational, and out to make the world better—both the US and the USSR agreed on that. Although knowing I was benefiting from post-Sputnik national security programs and aware of the ethical dilemmas of scientists (my friends and I were quite firm that we would never work on bomb technology—after all, we did read the *Bulletin of the Union of Concerned Scientists*), not until much later did I clearly understand the military-industrial reasons both governments invested so much ideological and financial capital in science.

Though as an undergraduate my interests turned from science, I maintained my commitment to knowledge and the professional life to transform society. What I had seen of my father's life left me with a bitter taste about the shallow satisfactions and sharp dealing of business. Of course, in school we had read *Death of a Salesman*. I could see, nonetheless, that money did keep you from being the victim of society and allowed your children to enjoy the benefits of the moderately privileged classes. The professional life, and especially the protected professional life of professors, offered a way to avoid victimage and victimizing. From the Marxian perspective that work is what we do to transform the world to make it more habitable, I was trying to resolve the tension in my parents' lives. How could I make my life and the lives of those immediately around me more habitable without making it less habitable for others? How could I in fact realize what we had been high-mindedly told, that all our fates depended on each other?

This tension was to pull at me once more, as my personal struggles in undergraduate life brought me to the humanities to work on my personal problems. When I asked what kind of life devotion to literature would lead me to, I could come up with no good answers—only devotion to the words of someone long ago, who was no wiser or kinder than anyone else, but likely devoted to outworn aristocratic beliefs. Nor could I answer for myself what professing those words to students would do to make this a better world. Even satire and critique seemed to me saving your conscience by despising others.

I was also torn and unhappy because of the hovering presence of the Vietnam War draft that monitored my every decision. While I protested and marched and talked with draft counselors, I was not yet ready to go underground or give up my professional niche. During an exploratory trip to Canada, my draft board breathing down my neck, I was overcome by outrage that I was being forced to give up my way of life. Powerless to stop the outrages to the world, having power only to keep myself from immediate complicity, I was thrown back to being outraged by the loss of my personal privileges. Brecht's lines came back to me: "*Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral*—First feed the face, then quote right and wrong."

So here is the melodramatic moment of deliverance. After I spent a year sequestered in grad school sponsored by a National Defense Education Act Fellowship (and you don't believe that the humanities are ideological?) becoming increasingly morose about a literary career, the government ended all graduate student deferments. The only alternative I found to boot camp, jail, or Canada, was teaching inner-city elementary school in Brooklyn, through an emergency credentialing program. What could be more of a deliverance—a way to avoid complicity in the war, a way to make the world better by overcoming racial and class inequities, a way to privilege education and knowledge, and a way to maintain a meager, but nonetheless middle-class salary and professional identity. A way that almost seemed plausible given my summer jobs in Headstart programs and camp counseling.

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In truth, I knew very little about teaching and the summer crash program did little to prepare me. On the other hand, it was the year of the teaching as social action books—Herbert Kohl’s *36 Children*, Jonathan Kozol’s *Death at an Early Age*, and James Herndon’s *The Way It Spozed to Be*. These books gave me some sense of the classroom and some classroom tricks, but much more a stance towards teaching and a model for understanding the kids. Then there was the exhilaration at the end of the summer, just before I started work, of the Chicago Democratic Convention, getting tear-gassed, charging barbed-wire trucks, and chanting “the whole world is watching.” What did we need conventional classroom wisdom for?

Things got even more complicated and exhilarating. I was assigned to PS 93K, in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, near the corner of Flatbush and Nostrand Avenues and in the shadow of the elevated train that every eight minutes shook the windows of the apartments of the most disrupted and distressed families in the school. The first day of school was also the first day of the divisive Ocean Hill-Brownsville Teachers’ Strike over community control. Although unions were an article of faith to me, I saw the community advocates were correct, that the response of the teachers and the union in the most difficult schools was to protect the interests of the teachers at the expense of the students. Community control offered some hope of making the schools accountable to the families the schools were supposed to serve. So I started my first day of teaching as a scab. With a community group and two more senior teachers (and the aid of an enormous bolt cutter), we unchained the gates of the school and “liberated” it (as we said in those days). High on political adrenalin, I spent the next two hours trying to amuse sixty kindergartners and first-graders in an improvised lesson on upside-down and inside-out. For two months, until the strike was resolved, we improvised, and I moved around grades—I hardly remember the chaos, but we maintained the politically necessary fiction that the school was in operation without the union teachers.

At the end of the strike I was braced to be fired by the returning principal. But the principal was greeted at the door by a large funeral wreath sent by someone in the community. He turned around, a community-appointed principle took over, and I had my job for the rest of the year. I was ostracized by all the teachers except for those two who opened the school. A new third grade was formed for me from the children the other teachers wanted to get rid of. All the supplies I received were a ream of crumbling yellow paper and a handful of copies of a Dick and Jane reader. I was given advice on how to get the children to sit quietly. It was a year before *Sesame Street* was to debut and Bank Street had barely begun to produce its inner-city reading series. So again I improvised. A local used-book store owner would buy children’s books in bulk and sell them to me for pennies above his cost; I left them at the back of the room, to be used in class, to be taken home, to be stolen. To produce class reading the whole class collaboratively composed (that’s what we would call it today, but then it was just a lot of screaming and jumping up and down) a script for the then popular *Crusader Rabbit* cartoon. The kids knew those

words, understood that story, and could read them. I bought a box of Spirit Masters and reams of paper, and liberated a key to the copy room. Every morning I would get up at 5 a.m., and rapidly compose directly on the typewriter onto the Spirit Master that day's episode of the Marcia and Willie stories—basic-vocabulary inner-city adventures that the class could relate to. I also made some math work sheets and transcribed the previous day's *Crusader Rabbit* group writing. I got to the school a half hour before other teachers arrived, so I could break into the copy room and print this all off. Some days after school I was naïve enough to visit unescorted the houses of the children who were missing class; it was obvious from the junkies in the hallways, urine in the stair wells, nodding out mother, and train rumbling every eight minutes why the kid had problems. I don't know that my visits did any good, except to get the kids another beating. I did manage to avoid being mugged and I learned how bad some kids' lives could be. On Saturdays I took three or four kids to museums. And then I collapsed until 5 a.m. the next Monday.

I don't know what I accomplished, but it did at least feel honest, and I survived the year. However, my class was far too noisy and unconventional for the community-chosen principal, and I was again fired. Again the community stood up for me, and I got rehired into a sheltered program for kids with emotional problems. Again, I improvised, but had the support of a team. Some kids made real progress, and others were deeply troubled and I could do little with them. Again I was fired for not following the rules, the way it 'spoed to be. In 1970 I took that as a badge of radical honor. By that time I also was sufficiently an emotional and physical wreck to get a 4F draft classification.

I came away from those difficult and transformative years with an important lesson. From those children who succeeded in school I could see how literacy transformed minds, personal bearing, and place within society. And for those who didn't I could see the enormous costs. As I watched my third graders move into fourth grade, I could see those who would make their way in schooling and those who would choose the streets. They were already getting tough. I could see chaotic first graders turning into students as they caught on to reading and writing. It also realized how fortunate this privileged child of the middle class and Ivy League had been, and how different my experience was from the meager, painful educational scraps offered to the kids of PS 93K. I understood literacy was something an adult could devote a life to, something that would help people and communities—something that might even ameliorate race and class divides. However, because composition was still unformed as a field and I was ignorant of the possibilities in education I returned to graduate school in literature—for want of any better idea what to do with myself

After a rapidly written dissertation in Renaissance poetry, I landed a part-time job at Baruch College, City University of New York. This soon turned into a regular position funded by an equal-opportunity program tied to the recent open admissions policy. For the next nineteen years I taught in the same building my father studied in, helping an ethnically diverse, but homogenously

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poor and working-class, group of students follow the same path of upward mobility my father had. I was happy to know my job was to teach writing to those students who had never had that opportunity before—in a few years Mina Shaughnessy would help us label these students “Basic Writers.” Some of them seemed the older cousins of the children I had just taught in Bed-Stuy, but only the ones who had succeeded to make their way through a failed school system. Though graduating in the upper parts of their class (large numbers never graduated), some were reading at a sixth grade level, writing at the third grade. I saw my task as sharing the cultural capital my fortunate education had given me. I began to unpack what it was I knew that allowed me to do well at elite institutions. I thought of it as spilling the beans on class secrets. But I also knew enough of their lives that I could not, should not assume they had the same experience, motives, knowledge I had. As savvy human beings they brought plenty to the classroom, but not the same things I did. So my teaching started in two places, looking at the students, what they knew and could do. Then looking at what I knew and could do. The pedagogy was to try to bring the two together. Bring their energy, concerns, knowledge, skills, communicative impulses into the academic place I knew well, and provide the tools so they could take possession of it.

One thing led to another in terms of pedagogy and research, leading me to the ways students used reading to write, the ways their writing and reading was located within disciplines, and the advanced literate practices of the disciplines and professions that provides the high end of aspiration and criteria. This is a story I have told elsewhere in more academic contexts, and the traces are in my publications. This work proceeded through constant engagement with the student writers in my classrooms, almost all of whom were seriously motivated once they trusted I was offering them something real and useful. They were wonderful to work with and their motivations, personalities, individual growth kept me attuned no matter how many times I taught the first-year writing courses, no matter how many papers I graded. Soon the issue became more than survival in college and the economic mobility offered by a degree; it became the increasing sophistication of thought, valuing of knowledge, and maturity of judgment that came with writing that engaged with the knowledge the university offered them. Predisposed by my earlier faith in the sciences and professions, I began to see the work of disciplines as themselves enriching all our worlds, solving problems, fostering co-operations, improving lives. My pedagogic mission expanded from working-class mobility to literacy as part of the infrastructure of communication, knowledge, and society. Again this motive can be clearly seen in my published research, theory, and pedagogy.

This appreciation of the value of writing and its engagement with academic knowledge has led me to act beyond advancing the particular lines of research and thought to which I have become attached. I have become increasingly involved in discipline-building activities. This is in part another lesson drawn from Mina Shaughnessy who rapidly established some of the first institutions of the field, the CUNY Instructional Resource Center, the *Journal of Basic*



*Writing*, and then sponsoring Harvey Wiener, Ken Bruffee, and Bob Lyons in forming the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors. I particularly saw a need for building the research and theory of the field, and thus have organized study groups, founded the Research Network Forum, began the discussions leading to the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition, and have taken on many editorial roles, from forums to edited volumes, to book series. These editorial roles have created the opportunity to mentor many newer researchers, to foster exciting new work, and to gather collected learning about writing of the last several decades in methods, handbook, and reference guides projects. While these projects may seem narrowly academic, to me these are continuations of the activist commitment I made to make the world more habitable by advancing the cause of writing. I believe many of my colleagues in the teaching of writing as well as research and theory of writing share this commitment and will understand why I claim this academic work as political.

This commitment has also led to more overtly political struggles, in the odd world of academic politics. Like many in composition, I have had to struggle to create institutional place to serve students well, to make English departments and universities respect and provide resources for the work of writing, to bring more progressive ideas of writing to campus requirements, to have publications in composition accepted for tenure and promotion, to have universities hire professionals on professional lines to lead the work, and to create graduate programs to advance the field. This has been a struggle on every campus I have worked on; and whenever I visit colleagues on their campuses, I find they are inevitably engaged in the same struggles. The particulars change and the frustrations accumulate, but on every campus there has been progress, and in the last four decades the profession as a whole has made enormous progress. I feel great pride in working with colleagues across the US and now internationally in bringing such enormous changes to the teaching of writing, impacting not only every college student, but also every child in every language arts class. While those in the profession may have very different views of what is important about writing, what theories should apply, how it should be researched, we all share a deep experience of the power of writing, and we have all shared in the great struggle of making this new field one devoted to improving all people's abilities to think, communicate, and mobilize knowledge for their own purposes in their own words.

The consequence of finding a professional commitment and life so satisfying to my activist impulses was, however, for many years a waning of my overt political life. I had paid at the office. I always voted, sometimes gave money, fumed at TV, was riveted by Watergate hearings, occasionally knocked on doors for candidates or turned up at a town meeting. I recycled, and didn't buy gas-guzzlers. I treated politics as a spectator sport of the comfortable and secure middle class. No matter how the vote turned out, my salary gradually increased, bank account accumulated, and publications list grew. The question that troubled us in the 1960s, whether we could work in the system, seemed to have ironed itself out. I saw enough other good people working the writing

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corner of the system and other laudable corners that I could keep alive the belief that in the long run progressive causes moved progressively, especially if thoughtful, educated, generous-minded people found their way into positions of power.

The rightward drift of the country; the failure of any ideology to restrain the most unfettered and rapacious versions of free-market capitalism after the collapse of the Soviet empire; the increasing power and irresponsibility of multinational corporations, deregulated here and above the law of any country, so powerful as to dictate national policies around the world; the strange alliance between a bullying religious Right and these corporate interests; the narrowing ownership of the media; a Republican party so empty of political morality that it was ready to corrupt the entire system for short-term advantage, all the while we were ignoring impending environmental and resource catastrophes—these things started to crowd my suburban academic dream. Clinton I saw as Horatio at the bridge, holding these dark forces at bay, but so preoccupied by them that he could get little else done. The last bulwark seemed to be collapsing with the stolen 2000 election. I had a brief hope when the early months of the Bush regime were so corrupt and inept that popular support was falling and the country seemed to tire of a kleptocratic corporate oligarchy. But when 9/11 came, I feared not another attack—after all, we were just learning that US exceptionalism did not grant an exemption from the insecurity that much of the world lived under for much of the time—but that we would be caught up in an emotional spiral of violence that would escalate hostilities, brutalize our nation, and tear apart the international co-operation needed for pressing global problems. I was actually heartened by a brief period of national maturity, with the media asking hard questions, people who had never traveled overseas recognizing the complexities of the world, wondering who we were and how we were perceived by others. But then Georgie got his gun and turned our confusion and fear into hate. Like a bad Western, we were in a corner and going to shoot our way out of it. To where? An empire. The world had to be made convenient for the US. Afghanistan was perhaps acceptable as an extended police action, doing what was necessary to gather criminals and their accessories, but when Bush began to make sounds about Iraq, I knew I could no longer just yell at my television, if just for my psychic wellbeing and sense of integrity. We were losing the country in the name of a free-market dystopia spiced by religious hopes of final days.

Fortunately, in Santa Barbara I was surrounded by a community that had long been activist. We almost immediately began a series of marches opposing the war, and were early to join the two hundred cities, towns, counties, and states to pass both anti-war and defence of civil rights resolutions. It was easy to join in, especially as the Internet had made spreading the word and logistics much easier. It also provided the news not carried by the media. On campus, a group of faculty and staff formed to support student leaders, who soon emerged to organize teach-ins, lectures, forums, concerts, poetry readings, vigils, walk-outs, days of reflection. We saw this well within our roles to foster discussion

of major issues and provide opportunities for the growth of future leaders. How could we remain silent and allow the campus to remain silent when major issues of the future of our nation and the future of the world were at stake? Again the Internet proved powerful as we created a local listserv, still in operation, to keep us informed of the latest news. We were lucky to have on campus experts on international law, the Middle East, and social movements. I could add a little rhetorical analysis into the mix.

Although we took our first moves from the 1960s play book, we improvised with no unified programmatic agenda beyond opposing the war, joined in solidarity with tens of millions other nationally and internationally. It was a passionate rejection of policies that moved us and a passionate commitment to peaceful solutions for the world that drew us together. Seeing the power of these new communities built around a passion for peace and facilitated by the Internet, I challenged the community of rhetoricians to get involved on a professional listserv. The response was large, and almost immediately we were able to establish the Rhetoricians for Peace listserv, which enabled newly bonded colleagues to create an information table and discussion resources for the 2003 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), during which, fatefully, the US began bombing Baghdad. This energized community became a formal organization, creating workshops, endorsing resolutions, building a website with resources for teaching and learning about the rhetoric of war and peace (special thanks to webbuilder Randy Cauthen and teaching resource co-ordinator David Stacey), and providing support for colleagues isolated in hawkish parts of the country. At our workshop at the 2004 CCCC, Harriet Malinowitz fostered the idea of a national *1984* reading and discussion, which rapidly won the endorsement of the Conference and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). The Rhetoricians for Peace continues today with its discussions and workshops.

From the vantage point of autumn 2009 the depth of despair that fell on progressives with the electoral disaster of 2004 seems hard to recover, as it seemed to entrench the power of a regime that had little understanding of the world, little respect for rights and democratic principles, little inclination to compromise, but was strong on overweening pride, doctrinaire certitude, and corrupt relations with profiteering corporations. It appeared that the electoral process may have been irremediably corrupted and democracy was on the verge of being lost. In such a situation, language education seemed a slow and tenuous project—even more so when the governmental “education reforms” made the conditions for serious language education near impossible in K-12 and threatened to seriously dampen open communication on university campuses.

The 2008 election seemed to have pulled us back from the brink, with its proof that the ballot can still work if we work at it. But how much we are moving back from uncontained corporate greed in response to the financial crisis and incomplete attempts at re-regulation are unclear. How seriously we will commit to counteracting global warming is still unclear. How much we can repair the long-term trajectory of global violence is very unclear. How much

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reason will return to educational policies is *very* unclear. If we taunt global warming to the point where there is no more forgiveness, if we continue to foster violence and ill-will in the world, if the shortages of the decades to come will only be addressed by domination and control, what good will gradual improvement of literacy do?

When I first agreed to write this essay in 2004, I had hoped to tell a triumphal story moving from youthful social commitment to professional contribution, then using the skills and position I had gathered to meet political challenges. When I actually wrote it in 2005, I was left with the problem of my adolescence—too easy to see what is wrong with the world, too easy to take my privileged life for granted. How can I reconcile keeping my little corner of the world habitable, if I live at the expense of the turmoil elsewhere? How would it even be possible? What are the actions that will allow me to see my life as honorable? What is a future of activism that makes sense? And now when I revise in 2009, though I have a bit more hope, those same questions stay with me.

Close to twenty years ago a foolish wag declared the end of history. Forty years ago, struggling with the politics of the Vietnam War and draft it dawned on me (duh!) that we all lived in history, that history is what unfolds around us by our being part of it. If we must resign ourselves to being in history, we have no choice but to be active in it in the ways our own dim and flickering lights dictate. I guess this is what you call activism. I hope that the good my generation has done is not undone, or our own contradictions exposed nakedly so quickly that we are emptied of purpose while we are still around. On the picket lines of my youth, I remember singing politically rewritten gospels—“Keep your eye on the prize, your hand on the plow, hold on.” “Gonna hold up the blood-stained banner, gonna hold it up until we die.” Where is the picket line? What is the prize? What banner?

Since I was a teenager, I had been meaning to write Pete Seeger, who had been singing bravely since his early days in the Weavers, even in the face of McCarthy red-baiting. My parents told me they brought me to visit his upstate New York home even before I remember. At every stage in my life I would draw courage and energy from his concerts and recordings, his anthems of freedom and endurance and joy. In early 2003, as I became engaged in activism around the Iraq War, I wrote him a long and rambling letter about what he had meant to me. He sent me a postcard. The picture side was the Milky Way, with a little arrow at one of small dots: “You are here.” On the back he wrote, “You keep singing, teaching. Who knows? Stay well, Pete” And he drew a banjo.

Thanks, Pete. I’m here.