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Source: *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring, 1990), pp. 155-161

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3885904>

Accessed: 20/01/2014 17:20

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## Demagoguery and Political Rhetoric: A Review of the Literature<sup>1</sup>

J. Justin Gustainis

In ancient Greece, a demagogue was, literally, a "leader of the people." The meaning of the term has changed considerably since then, however, and a demagogue today is regarded as someone who "appeals to greed, fear, and hatred" (Safire 163), a politician who achieves or holds power "by stirring up the feelings of his audience and leading them [sic] to action despite the considerations which weigh against it" (Scruton 115).

If "demagogue" is a modern day "devil term," then its usage will be accompanied by the degree of subjectivity which is a hallmark of such words and phrases in modern society. In short, the label "demagogue" is often used as a weapon by one group to attack another (Clark 423). This is especially true in American politics, where the term has been used as an "attack word" as far back as 1808 (Safire 163). This subjectivity may help to explain the wide variety of persons who have been, at one time or another, labeled as demagogues. Some members of this less-than-elite group are obvious and noncontroversial candidates: Senator Joseph McCarthy (Fisher; Luthin; Baskerville), Huey Long (Gaske; Luthin; Bormann; although exception to this label for Long is taken by Williams), George Wallace (Johannesen), Adolf Hitler (Blackbourn; Fishman), Louis Farrakhan (Rosenblatt), and such well-known Nineteenth Century figures as Dennis Kearney (Lomas, "Dennis Kearney"), "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman (Clark), and William Jennings Bryant (Tulis). Other public figures who have been nominated for the list are more obscure, including "Ma" and "Pa" Ferguson (Luthin; Herman), Gerald K. Smith (Sitton), and Henry Harmon Spalding (Thompson), while others would seem, at first glance, to be unlikely candidates: Jimmy Carter (Will), Jesse Jackson (Drew), Andrew Johnson (Tulis), and Senator Joseph Biden (Barnes).

In attempting to understand what is nominally called demagoguery, however, two important distinctions should be made. The first involves demagoguery and rhetoric. Although demagogues use rhetoric (as noted above), and although demagogic rhetoric has certain identifiable characteristics (as will be discussed below), it does not necessarily follow that a speaker who uses demagogic rhetoric on a particular occasion is thus properly to be considered a demagogue. As Luthin notes, "there exists a bit of demagoguery in the most lofty of statesmen. . ." (355). Thus, a demagogue would be correctly defined as one who habitually uses the hallmarks of demagoguery to be discussed later in this review of literature.

A second important distinction should be made, this one concerning the difference between what is nominally called demagoguery and nominally called agitation. The distinction has often been blurred in practice; for many, all agitators are demagogues, and *vice versa* (Lomas, *The Agitator* 18). Put simply, an agitator is someone who seeks to effect social change through rhetoric. The term often has a negative connotation because the *status quo* is usually resistant to change and thus wary of those who urge it (McEdwards 36). Although the agitator may resort to demagoguery, agitative rhetoric is not, in itself, demagogic (Lomas, *The Agitator* 19).

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Francisco, California, November 18, 1989.

The remainder of this review discusses the literature of demagoguery in terms of five areas: situations prompting demagoguery, personal characteristics of the demagogue, the focus on enemies, the demagogue's self-proclaimed role as savior, and the rhetorical appeals typical of demagoguery.

### **The Demagogue in the Rhetorical Situation**

It has been contended that some audiences and contexts are more likely to encourage the development of demagoguery than are others. In the southern United States, for example, demagogues have tended to flourish in the rural areas. Following the Civil War, the gradual breakdown of the South's agricultural economy led many farmers to feel victimized, both by the North and by their own leaders. This situation helped give rise to the phenomenon known as the "Southern demagogue" (Dykeman 562). The rural nature of the South, combined with the effects of Reconstruction, produced large numbers of Southerners who felt no real connection with their own state's political leaders (Larson 342-343). This alienation was exacerbated by the South's economic problems. As Gaske notes, "at the root, perhaps, of audience response to the demagogue is economic dislocation" (60). The demagogues of the South were able to capitalize on this, and were provided additional ammunition by the ever-present racial tensions in the region. In Dykeman's words, "it was on the subject of the Negro that the Southern demagogue reached his crescendos" (561).

Demagoguery was not, of course, limited to the American South. In this country, for example, it flourished in the Great Plains during the Depression (Herman 57), and the whole nation seemed to be fertile ground for McCarthy in the early Fifties. It should be no surprise that demagoguery has been seen, from time to time, in the United States, because democratic government seems to be one of the prerequisites without which demagoguery cannot operate. A demagogue can only succeed in an atmosphere of free speech and free expression, since, as noted earlier, demagoguery is intimately bound up with rhetoric. Even Germany was a democratic state during the rise of Hitler; it was only after this Nazi demagogue had achieved power that the country succumbed to totalitarianism (Gaske 59). In the Twentieth Century, especially, the demagogue has only been successful when he had a foundation of democracy upon which to build, and a democratic platform from which to speak (Neumann 236).

### **The Demagogue As a Person**

The work of those who have studied what is nominally called demagoguery leads to the conclusion that a demagogue is a person who possess at least three characteristics: he is motivated by self-interest, he evinces little concern for the truth, and he is an opportunist. Each of these will be discussed below.

A number of scholars have concluded that the demagogue's primary concern is the development of his own power, influence, and popular acclaim. Gilbert defines the demagogue as one "who seeks notoriety and power by exploiting the fears and desires of the people. . ." (51), while Johannesen concludes that the demagogue's "primary motive is selfish interest and personal gain" (76). In their study of America's Southern demagogues, Logue and Dorgan found that many of the promises made by such men were meaningless or unkeepable, designed primarily to increase the demagogue's personal standing among their followers (10).

Many studies conclude that the demagogue is a liar, or, at least, that he finds questions of truth to be irrelevant. Although Thompson maintains that "most demagogues are probably sincere in the sense that they are not consciously lying," (228-229), his viewpoint is in the minority. Graber found that, in demagogic rhetoric, "there is little concern for fairness or truth" (183), and this opinion is shared by Gilbert (51). Baskerville argued that demagogues are characterized by "the use of untruths and distortions," (9), although he was focusing specifically on the rhetoric of Joseph McCarthy. Lomas suggested several reasons why the demagogue and truth are nodding acquaintances, at best, if not total strangers: the demagogue may be so ignorant as to be unable to distinguish truth from falsehood; his own prejudices may prevent him from seeking the truth; or he may employ deliberate deception because it allows him to achieve his goals ("Rhetoric of Demagoguery" 161).

Demagogues have also been called opportunistic. That is, rather than possessing fixed convictions, they may choose to stand for whatever issue is burning hottest in the hearts of the people. Logue and Dorgan say that Southern demagogues "often acted opportunistically" (10), while Graber characterizes demagogic rhetoric by claiming that "appeals are entirely opportunistic" (183). The demagogue's willingness to latch on to the popular issue of the day has also been attested to by Johannesen (76).

## The Demagogue and His Enemies

The nominal demagogue cannot function in an atmosphere of social harmony and tolerance. Historically, demagogues have only been successful in periods of turmoil, division, and anxiety. This is well put by Ceaser, who says that "demagoguery . . . is characterized by the uniting of a constituency by means of opposing it to something else, be it an object within the community or another community altogether" (57). It is conceivable that the "enemy" denounced by the demagogue could be solely his own invention, but history shows that demagogues usually exploit existing hatreds and fears. As was noted above, demagogues tend to be opportunists. Such opportunities are not, unfortunately, rare. In the American South, for example, "hatred and resentment [were] concentrated on certain persons who [were] denounced as conspirators or rejected as unwholesome influences for the society" (Larson 345), which allowed Southern demagogues to flourish. In Germany during the 1920s, Hitler and other Nazi orators fixated on the popular belief in a high-level conspiracy which had been responsible for Germany's defeat, and this gave them a foothold on the public mind (Blackbourn 152). Senator Joseph McCarthy was, of course, able to capitalize on the widespread anxiety about a domestic Communist conspiracy which gripped America in the 1950s (Baskerville 8). The demagogue may well feel the emotions he exploits in his audience, but the feelings are also a tool: "Hate is aroused so that it will obscure thought and facilitate uncritical action" (Minnick 6).

One area of public concern especially vulnerable to exploitation by the demagogue is racial and class hatred. Since those near the bottom of the socio-economic ladder are among the most susceptible to demagogic oratory, the demagogue will attack the rich, the powerful, and the "interests" who take advantage of the poor and downtrodden (Luthin 307). Hitler railed against the bankers and industrialists of Weimar Germany, and as is tragically well known, took advantage of widespread anti-Semitism to focus hatred on the Jews. In the American South, the poor whites of the rural areas were resentful both of the North and of many mainstream Southern politicians (Larson 345-346). Further, the race

issue was always available for exploitation, and the Southern demagogues used it relentlessly (Dykeman 566).

While denouncing those who were dissimilar to his audience (by virtue of social status, wealth, race, or religion), the demagogue could also increase the identification his audience felt with him by portraying himself as a "man of the people." Many demagogues "retained popular support by appearing to be ordinary, down-to-earth citizens like those whose votes they courted" (Luthin 306). In his oratory, the demagogue will continually remind the audience of his humble beginnings, so similar to their own, and will speak in such a way as to show that he has not lost touch with his origins (Neumann 237). In the American South, demagogues often adopted "folksy" nicknames like "Pitchfork Ben," "Cotton Ed," "Pappy-Pass-the-Biscuits," "The Wild Man from Sugar Creek," and, of course, "The Kingfish" (Dykeman 561).

The demagogue also attempts to increase his audience's identification with him by embracing (publicly, at least) all the virtues which the audience members hold dear. He will espouse conventional religious beliefs; he will proclaim his patriotism; and he will employ whatever "god terms" he thinks will appeal. Huey Long, for example, used to tell Louisianans that his economic programs had been endorsed by William Shakespeare, Daniel Webster, the Pope, and Abraham Lincoln (Fisher 110). Elsewhere in the South, demagogues stood foursquare in defense of God, country, and, especially, Southern womanhood (Dykeman 560).

### The Demagogue as Savior

In order to gain broad popular support, the nominal demagogue will attempt to create a crisis mentality in his audience. This is not quite the same thing as the demagogue's taking advantage of people's hatreds and fears (as was discussed earlier). The difference is one of degree; people may experience hatred and fear on a daily basis and learn to live with it, but a crisis requires action. As Fisher put it, "Dissonance creates discomfort; crisis can create panic, behavior not ordinarily considered rational" (108). It is this irrational behavior that the demagogue will try to encourage and channel. Hitler did this in Weimar Germany. He had learned how to "paint vividly the horrors" of impending doom and to persuade his audience that only the most drastic action could fend off destruction (Fishman 250).

The "drastic action" which the demagogue talks about usually involves the audience giving him political power. Once he has that power, he promises, the enemy will be destroyed and the audience will be redeemed. The demagogue thus proposes himself as the audience's savior. Once the audience is convinced of the existence of crisis, the demagogue promises to restore order (Neumann 233-234). Gaske argues that demagogic rhetoric conforms to the guilt-victimization-redemption-salvation pattern developed by Kenneth Burke. The salvation is provided (at least rhetorically) by the demagogue himself (Gaske 61-68).

### Rhetorical Techniques of Demagoguery

The literature on demagoguery shows that the nominal demagogue typically employs any of seven rhetorical techniques: reliance on personalized appeal, oversimplification, emphasis on emotional appeals, use of specious argument, "ad hominen" attacks, anti-intellectualism, and political pagentry. Each will be discussed below.

**Personalized appeal.** Aristotle divided the artistic (i.e., rhetor-controlled) forms of proof into *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*: personal appeal,



emotional appeal, and logical appeal. The demagogue puts considerable emphasis on the first of these. As Larson wrote in his study of American Southern demagogues, "The authority of the men was personal rather than traditional . . . the demagogues were able to cultivate political loyalty through personal identification" (340-341). Gaske points out that one of the distinctions between the mainstream political figure and the demagogue is that, while the mainstream politician may represent or lead a movement, the demagogue *is* the movement (58). Demagogues come to embody the causes for which they fight, and much of their appeal to audiences is based on personal factors.

**Oversimplification.** Simplicity is a hallmark of much political rhetoric. This is an understandable approach, since most members of the mass audience are neither sophisticated nor well-educated. But the demagogue takes this prudent idea one step further — he oversimplifies the solutions to complex problems (Fisher 109-110). This has the double advantage of making the demagogue's oversimplified solution understandable to the mass audience, and making that solution seem preferable to the more complex, realistic solutions offered by mainstream politicians. Joseph McCarthy maintained that all of America's problems, both at home and abroad, could be blamed on "Communist subversion" (Baskerville 10). In the 1870's, Dennis Kearney blamed all the difficulties experienced by California laborers on the importation of large numbers of Chinese (Lomas, "Dennis Kearney" 163). Huey Long claimed that all the nation's economic problems could be solved by the simple plan of "share the wealth" (Fisher 109-110).

**Emotional appeals.** Just as most politicians regard simplicity in rhetoric as a virtue, so too would most of them admit to appealing to their constituents' emotions, at least occasionally. The difference between the mainstream politician and the demagogue is that the latter emphasizes emotional appeal to the exclusion of rational thought (Lomas "Rhetoric of Demagoguery" 165). This is what many people think of when they hear the word "demagogue": a rhetorical fire-breather who can turn an audience of supposedly rational people into a mob of howling madmen. This conception is slightly hyperbolic, but it essentially characterizes what demagogues try to do (Larson 346). The demagogue thus focuses much of his rhetoric at the "non-thinking side of human nature" (Minnick 6), because if the audience paused to think, it might think twice about the demagogue.

**Specious argumentation.** The demagogue does not ignore the cognitive aspect of rhetoric entirely. But when he does employ what classical rhetoric calls *logos*, his argument is often deliberately distorted. This can be true with respect to either reasoning, or evidence, or both. As Minnick notes, "although the demagogue does not like to reason at all, he will at times offer a kind of pseudo-reasoning which often deceives the intelligence instead of enlightening it" (6). "Pseudo-reasoning" refers to arguments which, while sounding good to the untutored listener, are in fact logically fallacious.

The demagogue is also careless with evidence, citing "proof" which is in fact proof of nothing at all. The textbook example of this approach is Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was much given to the waving of "lists" which were purported to contain the names of Communists in the State Department, or elsewhere. The lists were never produced for inspection; the evidence was never provided. As Lomas points out, "The citation of 'facts' is no guarantee of either their accuracy or their interpretation" ("The Rhetoric of Demagoguery" 164).

**Ad hominem attacks.** The *argumentum ad hominem* is a recognized logical fallacy. As such, it could have been discussed above under "specious argumentation," but it is so characteristic of demagoguery that it deserves separate mention here. *Argumentum ad hominem* (literally "argument against the man") involves ignoring the arguments made by an opponent and attacking the opponent's character instead. This was frequently employed by America's demagogues of the

South. For them, “the function of name-calling was mainly to create a climate of emotional excitement and personal involvement on the part of the voters” (Larson 347). Indeed, the rhetoric of such men often demonstrated “public contempt of social, economic, and political conventions” (Logue and Dorgan 9). In California, Dennis Kearney insulted his opponents with such venom and imagination that, had duelling been still in practice, he would have been challenged a dozen times (Clark 427).

***Anti-intellectualism.*** Gilbert (51) believes that anti-intellectualism is basic to demagoguery. It is not difficult to see why this might be so. Since, as noted above, demagogues attempt to set the lower classes against the upper, intellectuals are a natural target, since they are usually identified with the upper classes (in education if not in wealth). Further, the intellectual is the demagogue’s foremost enemy, since the former is often adept at pointing out the fallacious logic and oversimplifications of the latter. This is one reason why demagogues have frequently attacked newspapers; they were responding to the newspapers’ exposes of the demagogues’ specious rhetoric (Luthin 309-310). Intellectuals often present an easy target for the demagogue. Recognizing that complex problems require complex solutions (or may even have no solution), the intellectual rarely can offer simple, easily-grasped ideas to the public. The demagogue, with his flair for flippant answers and simple solutions, can sometimes make the intellectual look pompous or silly (Baskerville 10-11).

***Political pagentry.*** As has been mentioned throughout this review, demagogues tend not to be interested in serious discussion of issues. Instead, they are inclined to offer personal appeals and emotion. These are often provided at mass meetings, which are an attempt to take an advantage of crowd psychology (Neumann 239). Such meetings often contain other elements associated with pagentry: songs, marches, torchlight, repetitive slogans, bands, and banners (Fisher III). The rallies at which demagogues spoke were often reminiscent of “carnivals” (Larson), “Barnumism,” and “showmanship” (Luthin 303). They provided entertainment to attract listeners and simultaneously to prevent them from thinking too much.

The phenomenon called Demagoguery has not passed from the scene, either in America or around the world. It can only be combatted if it is understood. It is hoped that this review of literature will make some contribution to that understanding and will serve as a starting point to scholars who wish further to explore the rhetoric of demagoguery.

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