

In Praise of Kenneth Burke: His “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” Revisited

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After his election as chancellor in 1933, when Hitler’s programmatic manifesto *Mein Kampf* reached the North American Continent in numerous translations, the reaction ranged from mixed to very negative. It was the admirable achievement of one of the great rhetoricians of our time, Kenneth Burke, to have seen beyond the boisterous, “exasperating, even nauseating”¹ claims and statements of the Nazi leader, and to have discerned, by means of a rigorous rhetorical analysis, the sinister tenets of an eclectic fascist ideology whose impetus was ultimate aggression. In hindsight, it is no hyperbolic praise to call his book review, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” a visionary and prophetic document whose profound examination proved to be only too true! His rigorous examination of Hitler’s “acts and attitudes of persuasion”² cuts to the core of fascist propaganda. He could not foresee the apocalyptic destruction that would result in “The Battle” of WWII with all its horrors, but he did recognize the all-pervasive corruption of fundamental human values of the program in question. He also recognized the main pattern of this work: a perverse manipulation of religious paradigms for the purpose of political

¹Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” in *Kenneth Burke: On Symbols and Society*, ed. and intro. Joseph R. Gusfield (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1989), 211. This essay was first published in book form in Burke’s *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, (New York: Vintage, 1941), 191-220. Further citations from the 1989 publication appear parenthetically in text.

² Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969), particularly the sub-chapter “Persuasion,” 49-55.

propaganda. This is all the more admirable since the historical pragmatic context of the work in question was of a rather limited nature. Hitler's manifesto was targeted primarily at unruly party members who questioned the not yet undisputed "leader's" views and policies. Only when he did succeed in assuming absolute political power did the work in question acquire the status of a "program."

The structure of Burke's essay is merely that of a book review, as he states quite openly at the beginning. However, he reprimands his fellow reviewers:

If the reviewer but knocks off a few adverse attitudinizations and calls it a day, with a guaranty in advance that his article will have a favorable reception among the decent members of the population, he is contributing more to our gratification than to our enlightenment. (211)

Burke clearly felt that other reviewers were too glib or short-sighted in reviewing Hitler's book.

In order to discern the evils of a fascist ideology, Burke identifies a multitude of concepts that Hitler uses frequently, like the creation of a common enemy ("the Jew, as his unifying devil-function (214)" or the scapegoat mechanism (225). But Burke's central line of argument, namely that Hitler's ideology of listing the evils facing the nation has to be primarily analysed as the "corrupt use of religious patterns" (218), is borne out by our contemporary understanding today. Only few of Burke's contemporaries realized this, like Konrad Heiden who called it "a kind of satanic Bible."³

The components of Hitler's fascist "unification device" are broken up by Burke into four distinctive "features" (218ff):

(1) "Inborn dignity." This religious/humanistic pattern of thought is given an "ominous twist by

³Konrad Heiden, Introduction, *Mein Kampf*, by Adolf Hitler, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), xix.

his theories of race and nation” It translates into a Manichean *antithesis* of superior: inferior (Aryan: Jews/Negroes).

(2) “Projection device.” The “purification by dissociation” was achieved through the scapegoat designation that allowed an ailing middle class to assign social inadequacies to a single group and allowed them to “conduct business without any basic change whatsoever.” Hitler’s prose is a primary example of *apodictic* argumentation, his anecdotal experiences providing ample “proof” for his social analysis.

(3) “Symbolic rebirth.” Hitler, by staging himself as a visionary, a prophet, gives “a malign twist to a benign aspect of Christian thought,” namely a promissory goal.

(4) “Commercial use.” In the very pragmatic context of the thirties, he “provided a noneconomic interpretation of economic ills,” bedeviling “‘Jewish finance’ instead of *finance*” (emphasis in the original) that, if removed, eventually might leave “‘Aryan’ finance in control.”

Burke does not explicitly label rhetorical tropes, as, for example *antithesis* for the first point above or *synechdoche* for point 4. Instead, he emphasizes the pragmatic rhetorical context of Hitler as “relying upon a bastardization of fundamentally religious patterns of thought” (230).

The means are identified as

the basic Nazi trick: the “curative” unification by a fictitious devil-function, gradually made convincing by the sloganizing repetitiousness of standard advertising technique – the opposition must be as unwearing in the attack upon it.

(229)

Inside the totalitarian social system of Nazi Germany, of course, opposition was hardly possible since *Gleichschaltung* ‘consolidation of all media’⁴ eliminated the possibility of public

⁴Robert Michael and Karin Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi German: An English Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002) 192.

opposition and created ideal conditions for this kind of ideological advertising. Burke precedes his remark on the curative unification by introducing the conventional summarizing of the review, repeating the corrupt use of religious patterns:

What are we to learn from Hitler's book? For one thing, I believe that he has shown, to a very disturbing degree, the power of endless repetition. Every circular advertising a Nazi meeting had, at the bottom, two slogans: "Jews not admitted" and "War victims free." And the substance of Nazi propaganda was built about these "complementary" themes. (228-229)

Burke does not discuss, at this point, the fact that the liturgical ritual knows this technique of indoctrination, of "endless repetition," too.

Three short reflections shall illustrate why I find the foresight of this essay so penetrating in hindsight. First of all, Burke, although he explicitly refers to Hitler's insistence on his movement expressing at any given moment a sense of community, could not have known how true the focus of his analysis of pseudo-religious Nazi propaganda technique actually was — in a much wider sense than he described. Albert Speer, Hitler's confidant and, later, powerful minister of the arms industry, survived the war and later chronicled what had actually happened at headquarters. He was an architect by training, and Hitler entrusted most of his grandiose architectural schemes to him. In our context, however, the important feature is that Speer makes a convincing case on how Hitler deliberately developed a *Versammlungsarchitektur* — which can be loosely translated as "congregational architecture" that was designed for political mass rallies — and it did deliberately magnify essential parts of the liturgical Catholic mass ritual.⁵ The most visible and gruesome was the *Lichtdom*, the light dome, that is to say the spectacular

⁵See Josef Schmidt, "Événement fasciste et spectacle mondial: les jeux olympiques de Berlin en 1936," *Masses et cultures de masse dans les années trente*, ed. Régine Robin (Paris: Les éditions ouvrières, 1991) 171-174 (La mise en scene).

use of powerful spotlights arranged to create the effect of an ecclesiastical building. I call it gruesome because the spotlights employed were developed as state-of-the-art air defense searchlights! Another spectacular example is Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda movie *Triumph of the Will* (1934), an account of the Nazi party rally in Nuremberg. An opening sequence shows Hitler's plane descending on the city while casting a shadow cross on the ground that should symbolize his messianic mission.

A second, equally reprehensible, proof of Burke's insight into Nazi pseudo-religion is the historical analysis of how Christian churches dealt with anti-Semitic persecution; their uneasy dealings evolved right to the end of WWII and after. The Vatican reacted in a very ambivalent way to the gradually increasing persecution of Jews, whose blueprint is an essential part of the discourse of Hitler's "Battle." Indeed, his hate litany contains all the historical Christian arguments for anti-Semitism. The Catholic Church, during the thirties and early forties became ever more evasive in defending the principal target of Hitler's "bedeviling." A chilling account of this process of omission, Garry Will's *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*, depicts how this institution failed in a difficult and complex historical situation, but then tried to redress this failure by retroactively interpreting its covert communications of appeasement as overt condemnations.⁶

Thirdly, Burke's analysis of Hitler's pseudo-religious propaganda is borne out by ideological studies of Nazi Germany. One of the main themes of *Mein Kampf* is the well known racial "blood and soil" thesis. It was one of the secular political unification devices that Hitler used, assigning every possible social virtue to returning the German nation to a pure Aryan race and total domination of its perceived proper territory with a strong emphasis on an extensive agricultural class. But it was definitely proposed in the tone of a religious mission. Hitler was

⁶Garry Wills. *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 11-69.

“himself ascribing every calamity since the fall of the Rome to race mixing.”⁷

David Loewenthal’s contemporary analysis of a perilous trend in modern national ideologies relies on a basic contradiction: history versus heritage. According to him the historian seeks to convey a past consensually known, open to inspection and proof, continually revised and eroded as time and hindsight outdates its truths. The heritage fashioner, however historically scrupulous, seeks to design a past that will fix the identity and enhance the well-being of some chosen individual or folk.⁸

Hitler, being an historically rather unscrupulous political leader, adhered to the definition of heritage as “but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes;” his goal of propaganda, therefore, became a unification message “apt to be labeled as false, deceitful, sleazy, presentist, chauvinist, self-serving.”⁹ A vital part of his strategy was to unite a society as a nation by delusions about both its history and its ancestry. Thus Loewenthal, a modern historian, confirms in a different context what Burke had seen more than half a century ago.

Kenneth Burke closes his review of “The Battle” by returning to his own pragmatic context, namely that “Hitlerite distortions of religion apparent” not be used by American politicians “to perform a similar swindle” (230). His applied conclusion, an apt “rhetorical generalization,” is a message that seems to fit our own contemporary scene surprisingly well:

And it is the corruptors of religion who are a major menace to the world today, in giving profound patterns of religious thought a crude and sinister distortion. (230)

⁷David Loewenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 1998) 209.

⁸Loewenthal xi.

⁹Loewenthal x.

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“The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” was situated in a particular historical context that deserves scholarly attention. Burke formulated his analysis of Hitler’s book as a response to contemporary reviews of the unexpurgated translation of *Mein Kampf*, and he presented his essay before the Third American Writers’ Congress during the peak of a critical debate about fascist rhetoric. By understanding the influence of contextual factors on Burke’s essay, scholars will have a fuller account of one of his most acclaimed works. “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” has been heralded as one of Kenneth Burke’s greatest essays and as an exemplar of rhetorical criticism. After offering a metacritical commentary on the rhetorical and epistemological functions of metaphor, drawing on the work of Edwin Black and Susan Sontag, this essay examines Hitler’s metaphorical characterizations of Jews as exogenous threats to the German national body. Do you want to read the rest of this article?