

Kenneth Burke, John Dewey, and the Pursuit of the Public

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In *Deliberation Day*, Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin argue for the creation of a national holiday, “Deliberation Day,” in which citizens come together over a two-day period in their local schools and community centers to deliberate over the merits of presidential candidates and their platforms (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004). While Ackerman and Fishkin propose that the government pay each citizen a \$150 stipend for voluntary participation, the purpose is not so much to monetarily to reward citizens for “showing up” as it is to foster an enriched civic culture that would send shockwaves through America’s political infrastructure: “If Deliberation Day succeeded, everything else would change: the candidates, the media, the activists, the interest groups, the spin doctors, the advertisers, the pollsters, the fund raisers, the lobbyists, the political parties. All would have no choice but to adapt to a more attentive and informed public” (3). The task of Deliberation Day would be to create a new *social context* in which citizens could become enlightened through public participation. As the authors conclude the book, “We can, through an act of political imagination, create new institutions for redeeming the ancient promise of democratic citizenship. Ordinary men and women need not be the hapless playthings of the powerful. They can and must find new ways to hold their leaders to account, and redeem their dignity as human beings by responsibly shaping their collective destiny” (219).

Ackerman and Fishkin’s proposal is indeed filled with political imagination. I bring their proposal to light not to critique the possibilities and limitations of Deliberation Day, but to understand the way in which the authors understand “the public.” At the bottom, what the polity needs, Ackerman and Fishkin believe, is a public space dedicated to the reinvigo-

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ration of political culture. It is not that the citizenry is incapable of hammering out intelligent political solutions, but that it needs *access* to social contexts that facilitate deliberation and the emergence of a common good. To foster a culture of political intelligence, the public needs only the chance to enter the forums that will facilitate thorough, cooperative political decision-making.

Ackerman and Fishkin are not alone in calling for access to or creation of these types of forums. Habermas's bourgeois public sphere—a public space in which citizens could come together and rationally debate the activities of the state—essentially represents the evolution of a context, a social space, a public arena (Habermas 1989). The bourgeois public sphere is meant to be egalitarian, providing citizens a forum in which to debate openly and foster a common political consciousness.¹ But this sphere has proved problematic for a number of scholars. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993), for example, propose a proletarian public sphere to counter capitalism's socioeconomic domination over public resources. Joan Landes (1988) argues that the bourgeois public sphere entails male domination in public life, to the exclusion of women. Nancy Fraser (1992) builds on the feminist critique by adopting the term “counterpublics,” collectives of citizens—women, peasants, the working class, and other groups demarcated by issues of race, gender, and ethnicity—that arise in reaction to the dominant public sphere.²

In the introduction to *Counterpublics and the State* (2001), Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer argue that critiques of the bourgeois public sphere specifically and public sphere theory generally amount to three “reconfigurations” in the way in which scholars think of the public. First, scholars have come to recognize the existence and interaction of multiple public spheres. Second, they have come to acknowledge permeable boundaries of access to the multiple public spheres. Third, scholars have come to recognize the dynamic role of the state in shaping public discourse. One considerable result of these three reconfigurations is an increasing recognition of the political divisions that permeate society (Asen and Brouwer 2001, 17–25).

If Asen and Brouwer are right, and I think they are, these three reconfigurations represent the general thrust of contemporary public sphere scholarship, including as it is understood among communication scholars.³ And however diverse such scholarship may be, a few common themes seem to recur across disciplines. Multiple public spheres point to the differences between individuals and groups and how those differences create divergent “publics.” Permeable boundaries point to issues of access to and par-

ticipation in these divergent publics. And the role of the state in relation to these different publics points to issues of power relationships among various publics and institutions. To put it more directly, three issues in contemporary public sphere scholarship seem prevalent across academic disciplines: *identity*, *access*, and *power*. Those interested in issues of *identity* ask questions such as, How does one's identity contribute to his or her role in public life, and how do members of various groups publicly interact with members of other groups?⁴ Those interested in issues of *access* ask questions such as, What individuals or groups are able to limit the public roles of other individuals or groups, and who is included in democratic processes and who is left out?⁵ Those interested in issues of *power* ask questions such as, What groups control the resources of public engagement, how can given publics counteract the influence of other, more powerful publics and institutions, and whose voice is heard and whose voice is marginalized?⁶

To be sure, issues of identity, access, and power intermingle in many public sphere studies. Furthermore, I applaud these directions in contemporary public sphere scholarship. But my purpose in this essay is to suggest an alternative line of inquiry related to issues of "the public." My purpose is not to argue that issues of identity, access, and power are not important or revealing; rather, my purpose is to flesh out the possibilities of an alternative, or supplemental, approach to public sphere scholarship. What happens if we ask questions not of identity, access, or power, but of language itself? What happens if we set aside for the moment concerns over access to public forums and issues of identity and power that underscore the oppositional character of the citizenry, and focus instead on the linguistic possibilities of a public coming together? This is not to say that these issues do not address the possibilities of language. Nor is this to say that paying close attention to language will not yield understandings of identity, access, and power. The point of this essay is to explore how language can solve problems and build communities. The shift is indeed one of emphasis. But, as this essay will show, the shift in emphasis will entail important consequences for understanding the problems and possibilities of "the public."

To formulate this alternative approach to issues of the public I will employ the help of two giants of the twentieth century intellectual tradition: Kenneth Burke and John Dewey. As I will show, Burke and Dewey arrive at remarkably similar understandings of the role of language in the public sphere. To grasp their insights, I will read Burke and Dewey side by side, in a sort of postmortem dialogue. My argument in this essay is that

Burke and Dewey establish a model of the public based on the problems and possibilities of language. They both argue for a *reconstruction in language* to ameliorate specific social problems. In that way, they conceptualize a public based not primarily on identity, access, or power, but on the use of language in the public sphere. Their focus on the use of language in the public sphere helps us better understand the problem-solving and community-building possibilities of language itself.

My purpose for reading these two thinkers side by side is to highlight the importance of their theoretical similarities in spite of their political opposition. Burke and Dewey inhabited much of the same leftist, New York intellectual social circle. But they grew to have little appreciation for each other's brand of politics. As a matter of political identity, as a matter of advocacy, there was a chasm between Burke and Dewey. But as a matter of theory, as a matter of the problems and possibilities of "the public," they offered remarkably similar understandings of a linguistically pursued public. In that sense, Burke's and Dewey's theory of language in the public sphere highlight the prospect of a "coming together" in spite of political differences. Through their understanding of a linguistically centered public, Burke and Dewey made room for each other's political differences. Their example shows that a public "coming together" may not be as far-fetched as certain contemporary understandings of the public sphere may let on.⁷

First, I will flesh out the historical context Burke and Dewey shared, underscoring the political differences that kept them apart. Then I will outline their theories of social amelioration through language, focusing on their conceptions of the problem-solving and community-building possibilities of language. Finally, I will delve into the consequences of a linguistically centered approach to the public and its problems, juxtaposing Dewey's and Burke's theories of the public sphere with current theories that emphasize pluralism and difference over the prospects of a linguistic coming together.

Kenneth Burke, John Dewey, and Division in the American Left

There is no clear evidence that Burke and Dewey ever sat down together and had a conversation. There are, however, plenty of historical connections between the two.

Burke briefly attended Columbia University in 1917, and Dewey taught at Columbia from 1905 until his retirement in 1930. Burke never took a class with Dewey, but if he had, perhaps he might have admired Dewey's socialist political sympathies. In 1912, Dewey voted for Eugene Debs, socialist candidate for president, and well into the 1920s Dewey was involved in socialist initiatives in New York City.⁸ Like Dewey, Burke was partially a socialist, calling himself in 1917 "half-socialist."⁹ But Burke and Dewey never connected at Columbia. And Burke left the university with a particularly bad taste in his mouth. As he explains in a January 1918 letter to Malcolm Cowley, "I am quitting Columbia. . . . The essential fact is that I am going in a new direction. Suddenly becoming horrified at the realization of what college can do to a man of promise . . . I shall get a room in New York and begin my existence as a Flaubert."¹⁰

Yet whatever socialist political sympathies they may have shared, those sympathies were not enough to lead Burke and Dewey to the same conclusion regarding World War I. Toward the end of the 1910s, Dewey began siding with the Wilson administration and its plans for American intervention in the Great War.¹¹ But while Dewey was turning Wilsonian, Burke was growing more and more dissatisfied with America's political leaders. "Wilson talks so earnestly about our fight for democracy," he wrote to Cowley, "that people here will probably soon forget that to force a nation, nine-tenths of which does not want war, into a war which does not seem to it to be fought by people who want war is not the most logical kind of democracy."¹² As America entered the war, Dewey was becoming an even more high-profile public intellectual, an outspoken proponent of democracy, and Burke thought Dewey's type of democracy quite undemocratic.

Democratic or not, Dewey certainly earned a reputation as a one of America's foremost commentators on contemporary politics. In the spring of 1918, along with Thorstein Veblen and Helen Marot, Dewey became associate editor of the New York based literary, cultural, political and social magazine *The Dial*.¹³ Dewey's involvement in *The Dial*, though it began to wane in postwar years, certainly caught Burke's attention. Burke himself began publishing in *The Dial*, along with a host of other New York literary and cultural magazines in the early 1920s, and these publications began to bring him a sizeable amount of intellectual recognition.¹⁴

This literary and political criticism circle in New York during and after World War I was part of the larger community in which both Dewey and Burke were prominent figures. And they shared a number of friends in this community. Max Eastman, a well-known social activist and New York

City intellectual, was one such friend. Eastman was a student and friend of Dewey's, and Burke and Eastman knew each other through *The Masses*, a magazine quite vocal about its opposition to America's entering the war.¹⁵ Richard McKeon was also a student and friend of Dewey's and had connections with Burke. While a graduate student at Columbia—studying with Dewey, of course—McKeon tutored Burke in philosophy and educated him on the “scientific foundations” of knowledge. Burke called McKeon “the one bright spot in my intellectual life” (quoted in Selzer 1996, 41).

But the most direct connection between John Dewey and Kenneth Burke was Malcolm Cowley and the *New Republic*. Dewey's relationship with the *New Republic* blossomed when, while on a two-year lecture tour of Japan and China, he contributed numerous articles to the magazine, establishing a relationship that would last for one and one-half decades.¹⁶ While Burke had always been an avid reader of the *New Republic*, his affiliation with the magazine blossomed as Malcolm Cowley became the magazine's literary editor in 1929. Through Cowley's guidance, Burke even began to submit articles and reviews to the *New Republic*.¹⁷

But the 1930s brought a great divide in the American left. Dewey and his student and friend Sidney Hook, who considered themselves social democrats, even sympathetic to socialist politics, grew not to trust other leftists, such as Burke and Cowley, who considered themselves pro-Communist, even supportive of Stalin.¹⁸ Dewey saw those on the Communist left as ill-informed ideologues, blind to the troubling consequences that resulted from Communism: “It is disheartening that in our own country some liberals have come to believe that for reasons of expediency our own people should be left in the dark as to the actual atrocities in Russia. But truth is not a bourgeois delusion, it is the mainspring of human progress.” On the other hand, many Communist leftists saw Dewey in particular as an apologist for bourgeois capitalism, as a “philosophical lackey of American imperialism” (quoted in Martin 2002, 411, 415). This schism between the social democrat left and the Communist left led Dewey in 1937 to resign as contributing editor of the *New Republic* and sever all ties with the magazine, believing that its current editors “had given up what I take to be liberalism in order to be . . . apologist[s] for Stalinism” (410).

The year 1937 also marked the international commission to investigate accusations against Leon Trotsky. Under Lenin's leadership of the Soviet Union, Trotsky was second in command. But after Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin, who detested Trotsky, gained control of the Soviet Union and in the late-1920s deported Trotsky to Turkey. Traveling abroad, Trotsky

used his pen to fight Stalin, which led Stalin to accuse Trotsky of treason against the Soviet Union and of plotting to murder Stalin himself. But the division between Stalin and Trotsky extended much further than the Soviet Union. Both men had followers all over the world, including in New York. Dewey, for one, was much more sympathetic with Trotsky's form of socialism than with Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union. Burke, however, thought Trotsky a traitor. To settle the truth of Stalin's and Trotsky's conflicting accusations, leftist intellectuals established an international investigatory commission, independent of any national government. Two of the men organizing the commission were Sidney Hook and James Farrell, whom Cowley and Burke referred to as "deep and sincere enemies."¹⁹ Hook asked Dewey, at this time in his late seventies, to head the investigation, and a fight erupted. Those on the Communist left thought Dewey too anti-Communist to return a fair verdict against Trotsky. Cowley even wrote to Dewey to discourage him from heading the commission: "I think American progressives of all shades should stick together—they will have to hang together or hang in some other way. . . . The evidence is overwhelming that Trotsky is guilty. We must not injure the cause of liberalism and democracy" (32). Despite the opposition against him, Dewey headed to Mexico to lead the commission that ultimately found Trotsky not guilty.

This schism between the social democrats and the Communist sympathizers represents the great divide between Burke's and Dewey's political beliefs and is important for understanding the bitter political division that set them apart. And this schism may have also influenced Burke's review of Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty*, one of the only instances in which Burke commented publicly on Dewey's work.²⁰ Later reprinted in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, the review first appeared in September 1930 in the *New Republic*, around the time that the schism in the American left was growing wider.

Burke's review is both of Dewey's book specifically and of Dewey's pragmatism generally. And Burke is content with neither. His problem with pragmatism can best be summed as the "trouble with verification." In his review, Burke is preoccupied with the pragmatist's need to verify—as objectively right or wrong, good or bad, successful or unsuccessful—pragmatic value judgments. Pragmatism "owes much to experimentation," as Burke rightly understands. But he continues:

Should we situate the success of science in its perfection of measurement, it is harder to see that the application of its method to a criticism of values is analogous. Science owes much to experimentation, to pragmatic knowing,

but this method has been reinforced by an instrument equally important—mathematics, the instrument of quantification, of measurement. This instrument enables us to test an operation by means which minimize the opportunities for differences of opinion. (Burke 1973, 385)

Mathematics, Burke believes, offers the impersonal evidence of facts and figures—proof of evidence available to anyone who wishes to look. The foundations of scientific rigor, which Dewey seeks to co-opt for the study of value judgments, are measurement and self-evident results.

But unlike scientific progress and mathematical measurements, value judgments not only fail to limit opportunities for differences of opinion, they actually *create* ever more opportunities for differences of opinion. The pragmatist cannot ground value judgments in the scientific rigor and mathematical measurement that produce quantifiable certainty:

When judging the effectiveness of a value, for instance, we have to utilize some other value to appraise it. . . . By the experimental method there could obviously be no key value, in the sense of its antecedent existence, its acceptance on authority. Even a key value must be dependent upon experiment for its justification, and its worth could be tested only by the adoption of some other value by which to test it. (386)

Pragmatists, according to Burke, should not talk about matters other than science, matters such as values and social goods, with which Dewey seems unduly preoccupied. In areas of values and goods, unquantifiable matters, the pragmatist is involved in what Burke calls the “circular chase”—an unending, self-referential cycle of meaningless statements. Burke believes Deweyan pragmatists are “self-judging judger[s],” “self-measuring measur[ers],” who rely only on a “good so good it perceives its own goodness” (386, 387).

For whatever reason, Burke seems to have missed a lot in Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty*. Particularly, Burke’s entire critique hinges on what Dewey repudiates in the first chapter of the book: the strict demarcation between theory and practice. Burke insists that for pragmatism to “work,” its social application needs a “key value” or an a priori guide. For “experimentation” to proceed “scientifically,” pragmatic value judgments need objective rigor to guide social operations. But Dewey notes that beliefs about values are different from beliefs about “science” (1988, 15). An individual’s adherence to values remains a guiding principle whether or not he or she reasons to those values a priori. An individual can and will hold a belief about the good, the just, and the beautiful whether or not he or she has objectively “corresponded” to it.

In a scathing critique of the correspondence vocabulary, Dewey says that it is the individual's insecurity that leads him or her to try to "ground" his or her beliefs in an Objective, Universal Form (2000, 7). But this insecurity and attempt to ground beliefs is unwarranted, for there is an unnecessary division between theory and practice. The pragmatist leaves behind this division because values need no Objective, Universal, Unalterable Guidance in a reality that is forever in the making, forever modifying and undergoing experiences. Values need only be open to the lessons of experiences—they emerge in the "experimental empiricism" that guides personal and social action. The supreme task of human experience is to forge effective, operative judgments that intellectually inform personal and social conduct in an endlessly changing reality.²¹

Burke's review of Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* is peculiar because it is neither wholly laudatory nor wholly damning. But it is clear that Burke is content with neither Dewey nor pragmatism (at least insofar as Burke understood them).²² The real purpose in covering Burke's review of Dewey's book, and Burke and Dewey's historical context in general, is to show the remarkable political separation between the two men. This separation is remarkable because, despite their opposition, both propounded a theory of "the public" in which language was the tool for social amelioration. From different perspectives, they carved out the same niche in public sphere studies. And they did so over and above their leftist in-fighting. Perhaps their example offers a lesson for the possibility of public discourse.

The Public and its Problems: Language and Amelioration

A discursive politics underlies both Burke's and Dewey's understanding of "the public." Both believed that fruitful inquiry emerges not primarily through an understanding of what the public *is*—through an understanding of the structures and identities that constitute the polity—but through an understanding of what the public *can do*, an understanding of the possibilities for a diverse public brought closer and closer *through language*. "Language" here refers to a host of symbolic experiences—both discursive and non-discursive. It refers to the signs and symbols that help create common meaning among individuals—not only to the specific words shared throughout society, but also to the *public experiences*, in Gregory Clark's sense of the term, that promote a public coming together.²³ Cara Finnegan's understanding of Dewey's political approach could apply equally well to Burke:

“The primary challenge facing American politics is a rhetorical one: not just how to formulate solutions that work, but how to communicate with a disaffected American public” (2003, 165). Robert Asen notes that a similar orientation undergirded Dewey’s understanding of democracy: “The significance of democracy lay not in a predetermined end, but in the means of public life” (2003, 174).

In his famous *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey calls on scholars and political actors to stop conceiving of “the public” as something fixed, to stop fixating on what the public *is*: “The ramification of the issues before the public is so wide and intricate, the technical matters involved are so specialized, the details are so many and so shifting, that the public cannot for any length of time identify and hold itself” (1954, 137). But in order to proceed with his inquiry, Dewey does offer a working definition of the public: “The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (16). Dewey’s definition—vague to say the least—works as a springboard for pursuing more pregnant questions. The real issue for Dewey is the achievement of a democratic society, one coherent and responsive enough to accomplish the “business” of the people: “Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences” (126). Dewey’s point is not that America does not face “public” issues. Public problems exist aplenty. Dewey’s point is that “the public,” or a dimension thereof, must be forged in a way amenable to the specific problems it encounters.

The way in which Dewey speaks of “the public” and the language he employs is particularly important for the current purposes. When Dewey speaks of “the public,” his words are words of process, of transformation, of undergoing. The task is to “call a public into existence,” meaning the task is to *forge* a version of “the public” able to overcome intelligently the obstacles before it. This language of process and transformation is also the language with which Dewey describes the Great Community, what he calls “a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being” (184). Dewey employs this same language to address America’s economic problem, what he describes as the problem of “readjusting social relationships; or, from the distributive side, as that of securing a more equable liberation of the

powers of all individual members of all groupings” (192). Dewey’s language is that of *restructuring*, *readjusting*, and *reconstructing* forms of life given the actual conditions of personal and social experience.

This same language of process and transformation runs throughout Burke’s understanding of public life. To be sure, Burke does not provide as clear a picture of “the public” as does Dewey. But it is possible to apprehend his understanding of the situation in which society finds itself. In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke underscores the *social* dimension of language: “The mind, being formed by language, is formed by a *public grammar*” (1959, 341). Burke’s point is that social language permeates the individual. In other words, language connects the individual to society—language *transforms* the individual into a specific type of social being. In this way, Gregory Clark, after linking Burke to Dewey’s conception of the public, frames Burke’s notion of identification in terms of social transformation: “the separate identities of individuals are constantly reconstituted as people participate in the shared experiences of public life. . . . In that process, communities are reconstituted in the awareness of those individuals, communities that comprise myriad individual decisions of unity and of division” (2004, 11).

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke returns to the notion of individual transformation through language, this time answering the “so what” question. Given that language connects the individual to society, what follows? Burke says, “The *Rhetoric* must lead us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure, the Logomachy, the onus of ownership, the Wars of Nerves, the War. . . . Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall” (1969, 23). Language must lead “us” (society, “the public,” the community) through the problems that confront “us.” In other words, the test of language is its functionality, its ability *to cope with* the state of Babel after the Fall. For Burke, functionality is indeed the purpose of naming: “Naming is done, not for the sheer glory of the thing, but because of its bearing upon human welfare. . . . The names for typical, recurrent social situations are not developed out of ‘disinterested curiosity,’ but because the names imply a command (what to expect, what to look out for)” (1973, 294). In these texts, Burke views language based on its operative potential. Language must prove fruitful and functional; it must be an effective instrument for living.

Dewey understands language like Burke does, valuing language based on its functionality. For Dewey, an effective language fosters a bond between estranged entities. As he puts it,

Only when there exist *signs* or *symbols* of activities and of their outcome can the flux be viewed as from without, be arrested for consideration and esteem, and be regulated. ...As symbols are related to one another, the important relations of a course of events are recorded and are preserved as meanings. Recollection and foresight are possible. The new medium facilitates calculation, planning, and a new kind of action which intervenes in what happens to direct its course in the interest of what is foreseen and desired. (1954, 152, 153)

Language offers the possibility for “conjoint experience.” Language helps weave the fabric that runs throughout society. It is a matter of pursuing unification: “Wants and impulses are then attached to common meanings. They are thereby transformed into desires and purposes, which, since they implicate a common or mutually understood meaning, present new ties, converting a conjoint activity into a community of interest and endeavor” (153). Applied to the public, Dewey’s terms speak not of what the public *is* but of what the public can *do*. Through signs and symbols, meaning becomes possible. Language facilitates social undertakings and works to direct the flow of experience. Meaningful conjoint activity becomes possible through communication.

The important point is that the public orients itself to what it can become, and this point entails a rhetorical lesson. It is *not* that people have no understanding of “the public”—they clearly do. The lesson is that this understanding of “the public,” “publicness,” or “society” can be used to *pursue a better public*. The force, the *meaning*, of the public is not what it *is* but what it can *do*, where it can go, how better it can operate. To be effective, the public’s language, its rhetoric, must seize on this. The public must be able to use the language that bonds its members together to advance its purposes, to produce fruits in social interactions.

Consequently, operative language is the element guiding the shift from what the public *is* to what it can *do*. Dewey puts the point clearly: “The heart of language is not ‘expression’ of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership” (1958, 179). At the very bottom, language is supposed to prove fruitful in human experience, facilitating meaningful undertakings, enabling a coming together of a nature and society in need. Because individuals possess a sense of reality, truth, and goodness, irrespective of their correspondence to formal, a priori principles, “the public” has something to *work with*; the public has

the ability to use citizens' beliefs and values as starting points for enabling the emergence of a Great Community. "The lesson to be learned," writes Dewey, "is the importance of ideas and of a plurality of ideas employed in experimental activity as working hypotheses" (1989, 77). For Burke, the idea is a *frame of acceptance*—using one's vocabulary as a *working tool* for engaging others in society (1959, 92). The public's beliefs, desires, and values need not "mirror reality" in order to be effective and beneficial. Such beliefs need only act as starting points for charting one's course, for gauging the public's potential.

Perhaps an example of operative language will make the point clearer. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke embarks on a three-part mission: to flesh out the general "orientation" of signs and symbols, to analyze how those signs and symbols can forge a new, more functional orientation, and to investigate the process of transition between these two orientations. The word at the center of the transition between the existing orientation and the new orientation is "piety." Burke's use here is not a religious one, but refers to the building of a system, to "a desire to round things out, to fit experiences together into a unified whole. Piety is *the sense of what properly goes with what*" (1965, 74). Furthermore, the task of piety is to put together a system of orientation that is functional: "Piety is a schema of orientation, since it involves the putting together of experiences. The orientation may be right or wrong; it can guide or misguide" (76). When one's system of orientation becomes inoperative, when it "misguides," the need is to shift one's orientation, to *readjust* one's symbolic system to operate more fruitfully. And to readjust one's orientation, a little *impiety* may be the ticket to becoming functional again. The approach, Burke says, is "re-orientation or verification by way of verbalization" (84).

As new problems arise, the tool for reorienting one's system of living is language. Dewey believes that the public's understanding of "individualism" in industrial society needs a reorientation. In *Individualism Old and New*, he makes the point that America's historical understanding of individualism—the understanding of the isolated soul sustaining his or herself in the face of natural dangers—is outmoded in a society dominated by the "bigness" of industry:

The problem is seen to be essentially that of creation of a new individualism as significant for modern conditions as the old individualism at its best was for its day and place. . . . The issue will define itself as utilization of the realities of a corporate civilization to validate and embody the distinctive moral

element in the American version of individualism: Equality and freedom expressed not merely externally and politically but through personal participation in the development of a shared culture. (1999, 16–17)

Dewey is here calling specifically for a public reorientation toward individualism that will enrich culture. In contemporary industrial society, the individual faces the “quantification of life, with its attendant disregard of quality” (12). Furthermore, the “disintegration of individuality” is largely “due to failure to reconstruct the self so as to meet the realities of present social life” (33). Thus, considering the ineffectiveness of classic “individualism” in an industrialized society, a linguistic reorientation becomes necessary: “The future is always unpredictable. Ideals, including that of a new and effective individuality, must themselves be framed out of the possibilities of existing conditions, even if these be the conditions that constitute a corporate industrial age. The ideals take shape and gain content as they operate in remaking conditions” (82). The point is to *remake* the conditions of the present to pursue a better future.

And the public pursues a better future *through language*. For both Burke and Dewey, language is a tool, though neither reduces language to instrumentality alone. Indeed, the aesthetic dimension of language for Burke and Dewey is unmistakable.²⁴ Language as a tool means language must become operative, practically and aesthetically, in a number of diverse contexts, seeking to accomplish specific tasks and imbue experience with meaning. Language tries to accomplish practical and aesthetic purposes by infusing objects and events with significance and directing the course of experience. In *Experience and Nature*, one of the only philosophical treatises on metaphysics to contain a chapter on communication, Dewey calls language “the tool of tools” (1958, 168). He writes that “Language is a natural function of human association; and its consequences react upon other events, physical and human, giving them meaning or significance” (173). The point for public purposes is that language is a way of bringing individuals together, of creating meaningful bonds among citizens with common interests and purposes. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke calls literature “equipment for living,” meaning that the creation of literature, the embodiment of language, enables individuals to live life more fully. As Burke puts it, “Proverbs [and literature] are *strategies* for dealing with *situations*. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them” (1973, 296, 297). Effective, intelligently created language cre-

ates a common toolkit with which the public can deal with the problems before it.

But there is an important value that undergirds this belief in language as a tool: meliorism. Meliorism holds that circumstances *can get better through human involvement*.²⁵ The attitude is not that life *will* get better, but that it *can* get better through the ways in which people handle the specific obstacles before them. In terms of language in the public sphere, the belief is not that by formulating a specific vocabulary humanity will forever be saved, but that by crafting linguistic solutions to specific problems life can get better. The public will always have more work to do, but betterment comes incrementally, in small steps toward amelioration. As Dewey puts it, “To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires, and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values” (1954, 154).

Burke’s meliorism emerges from his understanding of identification. For Burke, identification enables individuals to pursue a common identity, to initiate a process of *betterment*.²⁶ As Burke writes, “[Identification] *is not rooted in any past condition of human society. It is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols*” (1969, 43, italics in original). Division and estrangement exist—this is a realistic acknowledgment—and language is the tool for filling in some of the attendant gaps. The underlying belief is that language *can induce cooperation*; language *can* serve social purposes and function to strengthen “the public.” Language will not *necessarily* prove to be a tool for salvation, for the history of the world is riddled with examples of the damning possibilities of language. That is specifically why Burke reviews Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*—to explore the magic of language as a tool of damnation. Burke assesses Hitler’s opus because it is necessary to understand the power of language. Understanding and harnessing the potential of rhetoric is part of sowing the seeds of social goodness.

Perhaps the best way to sum up Burke’s and Dewey’s understanding of language in the public sphere is to describe it as the call to alleviate the public’s problems through a *reconstruction in* language. The public faces a number of problems in circumstances continually born anew. Realistically, there is no way to deal with all of the public’s problems in one Perfect

Discourse. As Dewey writes, “Political forms do not originate in a once and for all way. The greatest change, once it is accomplished, is simply the outcome of a vast series of adaptations and responsive accommodations, each to its own particular situation” (1954, 84). The public’s task is not to create One True Language, but to confront specific problems with an intimate understanding of the needs of the particular situation. To solve problems, the task is to *reconstruct* a specific thread in the discursive fabric that unites person to person in the public sphere. According to Burke, “The individual’s deepest means of support in the civic texture resides in such a communicative or cooperative bond. By it he is ‘transcendentally’ fortified” (1965, 236n.). To keep those communicative bonds strong, the public must participate in a realistic assessment of the problems it confronts. Concerns over the public’s possibilities should begin with concerns over the possibilities of the public’s discourse. The public should face the tasks before it by assessing the immediate needs for a reconstruction in language. Thereby, amelioration becomes possible.

The Importance of a Reconstruction in Language

Read side by side, Burke’s and Dewey’s understanding of language in the public sphere sheds light on the fruitfulness of their theories. Historically and geographically, Burke and Dewey occupied similar and contemporaneous spaces. But politically a chasm ran between the two. Each viewed the other’s type of politics as inoperative, unwarranted, and ill-informed. But this essay has put the two in conversation to show how, without knowing it, Burke and Dewey made room for each other. Through their remarkably similar understanding of language in the public sphere, they made room for each other’s opposing politics. As two giants of the twentieth century intellectual tradition, they may not have been able to agree on specific policies for America’s political future, but they were able to agree that amelioration had to come from the signs and symbols that strengthen the public. In that way, they united rhetorically, under the call for a reconstruction in language.

The right question for scholars and political actors to ask regarding the public may not be *who*—who’s in opposition to whom, who’s in what social group, who’s voice is being marginalized—but *how*. This is not to say that questions of *who* may not arise, but it is to say that such questions

are not the most promising way to approach the public. If the hope is for amelioration, the best things to focus on are the *tools* that create amelioration, the tools of language. The most promising path to amelioration may be to ask, given that people and groups are divided and will always be divided to some degree, what specific reconstruction in language will allow us to forge a *better* public?

This hope for amelioration points to Burke's and Dewey's most important contribution to the study of the public sphere: their insistence that scholars and political actors look not for large-scale success, but for local, concrete, specific instances in which the public makes progress through language. Their advice is to move public sphere studies toward particular problems needing a linguistic solution. The public is forged in degrees, in increments, in the alleviation of particular pain. A successful public coming together must be judged not primarily on political inclusion or exclusion—on the issues of large-scale political power relations—but on particular moments in which language becomes shared. For even if the public were built on issues of identity, access, and power, without a coherent, intelligent, operative discourse, forums of public interaction would produce no fruits. To establish public bonds, an operative language must be at work.

This type of approach gives scholars another way to study the public sphere. For example, Catherine Squires's study titled "The Black Press and the State," examining 1917 through 1945, juxtaposes the "the Black public" and "the white public" (2001, 111, 136). The problem the Black public faced, Squires says, was that

Despite the myth of the free press and an egalitarian public sphere free of state intervention, the quality of the government oscillations encountered by the Black press threatened to hinder the ability of the Black public to gather and transmit information through the press. . . . One major aim of any marginalized public sphere is to be able to project its ideas and interests into the larger public to affect changes in dominant opinion and policy. (130)

While the black public did initiate "oscillations" between itself and the dominant public, Squires writes, "This was not large-scale, democratic discourse between the masses. Rather, the oscillations of the era covered here are example of *integrative marginalization*, whereby elites of the marginal public are allowed some access to power, but the majority of the marginalized group is left out of discourse and decision-making processes" (131).

Burke and Dewey would likely say that Squires is thinking too big. The small successes of the black press should not be seen as producing “integrative marginalization,” but as constituting steps in the right direction, wherein the public has crafted a better version of itself. Surely, more work needs to be done; that will always be the case. But the ability of the black press to help weave a discursive fabric in specific areas of public need is the type of amelioration for which Burke and Dewey call. If amelioration through language is the aim, the issue may not best be seen as the *white public*’s continued domination of the *black press*. The issue may best be seen as a local example of *public problem-solving*, the work of language to alleviate particular pain. The shift is indeed one of emphasis, but the emphasis is important. Focusing on issues of identity, access, and power may serve to grasp the fault lines that divide the public. But to grasp the possibilities for a public coming together, perhaps it is best to focus on the hope for a functional language, which can help bring together estranged entities who, despite their estrangement, must work together to thrive personally and socially.

This is exactly what Burke tries to do in his review of the play *Run, Little Chillun!* (1973, 361–68). Burke’s language in this review is undeniably crude by today’s standards, but it does shed light on the way in which he understands the consequences of language in society. Burke says that in the play *Run, Little Chillun!* “One sees a Negro genius, an attractive positive ability, exemplified with a conviction, a liquidness, a sense of aesthetic blossoming, and a gift for spontaneous organization which is capable, I believe, of actually setting the spectator aquiver as he participates in the vocal and mimetic exhilaration taking place before him” (362). The narrative in *Run, Little Chillun!* is one of adapting and sustaining traditional, spiritual values and symbols in the presence of an evolving society, in the face of the “demands of commercial and financial conquest.” But an even greater problem arises when one considers the presence of oppositional groups vis-à-vis the values of the play. On the one hand is an oppositional “‘advanced guard’ of Negroes [who] are teaching their suffering people to ‘organize’ in ways more suited to these nasty times—and I am sure there is much in *Run, Little Chillun!* which they must consider with distrust, attempting to stamp it out of their people” (367). On the other hand are oppositional “Caucasians,” whose pursuit of economic advancement has “pledged them to ambitions which often make for emptiness as regards basic cultural or religious gratifications, and for a compensatory secular expansiveness which often involves them in deadly quarrels with one an-

other.” Burke’s conclusion is that the issues of the play *Run, Little Chillun!* are not issues of opposition among multiple publics—“traditional” blacks, “advanced guard” blacks, and “Caucasians”; they are issues of a fractured society—“the public” itself—which needs to confront a very pressing and specific problem: a fading spiritual side of life. And this immediate, specific problem is largely linguistic. Burke asks, How do we, the public, reinvigorate the spiritual values we share through language in the face of institutions that no longer promote such values? How do we give the public the linguistic tools necessary to enhance its spiritual fabric? The issue should not be seen as an issue of political and group opposition: “I guess it is a sorry time. One hates to think that such insight as is evident in *Run, Little Chillun!* must be abandoned, as ‘unequal’ to the tincans of the glorious present” (368). Instead, the issue should be seen as an issue of symbolic purchase, of symbolic fruitfulness:

It will be difficult to abandon ways so accurately attuned to the organism, so close to the orthodoxies of the body. . . . Perhaps we may even some day hope, should there be any of us left, to regain a skill in processes analogous to these. . . . And perhaps should there be any of us left, and with spirit enough to care whether we regained anything, we may console ourselves with the thought that in a repossession we shall be more soundly enriched. (368)

Burke deemphasizes the status of opposition in favor of emphasizing the possibilities of an ameliorated future—betterment based on a “repossession” of the values and symbols that attune the organism to the rhythms of life.

Burke’s praise of *Run, Little Chillun!* suggests at most the possibility for a small social gain, a small manifestation of a better public. Yet small possibilities are enough. Reconstruction in language is a task never finished, but the small victories are enough to keep the project going. There will be no universal solution to the problem of estranged individuals, of a society riddled with opposition, but language can surely work to strengthen certain spots in the relational fabric that bonds person to person. As Dewey puts it,

We must know that the dependence of ends upon means is such that the only *ultimate* result is the result that is attained today, tomorrow, the next day, and day after day, in the succession of years and generations. Only thus can we be sure that we face our problems in detail one by one as they arise, with all the resources provided by collective intelligence operating in cooperative action. (1989, 134)

While a completely unified public may be a fiction, while universal, ultimate success in social matters is a false hope, at least more and more healthy manifestations of the public can be a part of the reality forever in the making.

The upshot of this view is that “the public” may not be as fractured as some believe, or, better, it *will* not be as fractured as some believe *if* the public continues to forge a fruitful discourse and manifest better versions of itself. Both Burke and Dewey say that language can be used to create a fabric that unites people through shared understandings and pursuits. Dewey calls this project “the energetic, unflagging, unceasing creation of an ever-present new road upon which we can walk together” (134). The project of the current generation is to find a language that will fruitfully engage the specific problems at hand. Success may only come in small steps, but those steps are enough to begin sharing the words that ameliorate our interconnected world.

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Notes

1. For a concise summary of Habermas’s public sphere work, as well as a summary of various reactions to Habermas’s theory, see Goodnight and Hingstman (1997, 351–59).

2. The rest of *Habermas and the Public Sphere* contains essays by historians, philosophers, linguists, political theorists, and others interested in critiquing Habermas’s conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere.

3. For examples of public sphere scholarship in communication studies, see McGee (1975), Goodnight (1982; 1987; 1989; 1997), Hauser and Blair (1982), Hauser (1987; 1997; 1998; 1999), Griffin (1996), Phillips (1997), Doxtader (2003), and Asen (2004).

4. For example, see Taylor (1994).

5. For example, see Fishkin (1995) and Shapiro (2003).

6. For example, see the collection of essays in Robbins (1993), as well as Deem (1999) and DeLuca and Peeples (2002).

7. See specifically Robbins (1993).

8. See Westbrook (1991, 194, 278).

9. Kenneth Burke to Malcolm Cowley, July 20, 1917 (Jay 1988, 47).

10. Kenneth Burke to Malcolm Cowley, January 6, 1918 (Jay 1988, 56).

11. For a history of Dewey’s internal struggle regarding his support over the war, see Martin (2002, 263–75).

12. Kenneth Burke to Malcolm Cowley, May 31, 1917 (Jay 1988, 38).

13. See Westbrook (1991, 233).

14. See Selzer (1996, 57).

15. Eastman’s work for *The Masses* even ended up landing him on trial in 1918 for violating the Espionage Act. See Selzer (1996, 25).

16. See Martin (2002, 310–27) for a nicely done summary of Dewey’s activities in Japan and China.

17. See Burke’s letter to Cowley dated August 17, 1936 (Jay 1988, 212–13).

18. See, for example, Jay (1988, 244).

19. Malcolm Cowley to Kenneth Burke, April 28, 1941 (Jay 1988, 244).

20. The other example is Burke's review of Dewey's *Liberalism and Social Action*, reprinted in Burke (1973, 388–91).
21. See Dewey (1988, 221), as well as Dewey (2000).
22. For the overlap, and lack thereof, of Burke and pragmatism, see Lentricchia (1983), Gunn (1987), Blakesley (1999), Jay (1997), and Crusius (1999).
23. See Clark (2004).
24. In his *Rhetorical Landscapes in America* (2004), Gregory Clark makes this clear of Kenneth Burke. And Philip Jackson treats the aspects and implications of Dewey's understanding of aesthetics at length in his *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (2000).
25. For a more direct treatment of meliorism, see James (1977, 466–67).
26. This is one idea Gregory Clark treats at length; see Clark (2004).

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