Identification and Division in the Current Crisis

By John R. Edlund

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I don't usually write about politics in this blog because I think that rhetoricians should be as objective as they can be. I often tell my students that their job is to analyze how the rhetoric works and how effective it is, not who has right on their side. But there comes a time when certain things must be addressed.

As I write this, the whole country, already in the midst of a pandemic, is dealing with the anger, grief, and frustration of yet another death of a black man at the hands of police. I want to write about this in terms that Kenneth Burke would use. (A previous post explains more about Burke.) There is a danger that in using theoretical terms to analyze such a visceral and traumatic event, I am putting in too much emotional distance and escaping into cold abstractions. That is not my intent. I want to try to understand what is happening.

On May 25, 2020, a white police officer in Minneapolis put his knee on the neck of a black man and kept it there for nine minutes, even while the suspect complained that he could not breathe. The suspect, George Floyd, died.

Agent-Act Ratio

An agent-act ratio would determine that the act was motivated by the nature of the agent, in this case the police officer. This ratio is at the heart of all of the "bad apple" explanations of police brutality. If a few bad officers are the root of the problem, logically the solution is to investigate and fire those officers and improve hiring procedures. Invoking this ratio has the effect of deflecting blame away from institutions and officials and onto individuals.

However, at least three other officers stood by or assisted in this act. They qualify as co-agents. Are they more bad apples? They are all members of a police department. Are all the officers in the department co-agents responsible for this act? Is the training and culture of the department at fault?

Circumference

What I am doing here is what Burke would call expanding the "circumference." Burke usually uses this term in talking about the "scene." The scene, or context for an act can be small, a particular intersection in a particular neighborhood, for example, or it can be as big as a nation and as long as history. But here, as I expand the circumference from one agent, to co-agents, to the whole department, perhaps to police departments throughout the nation, the concept of "agent" begins to become scenic. I'll get back to scene in a bit.

Agency-Act Ratio

Another aspect of this discussion is how police departments are equipped. In recent years, it has been the practice to sell surplus military gear to police departments. This brings us to an agency-agent ratio. If police are equipped like soldiers with assault rifles, flak jackets, and even armored vehicles (all

"agencies" in Burke's sense), how does that define their role in the community? An individual equipped like a soldier is likely to think of him or herself as a soldier. This is sometimes discussed as a warrior/guardian binary. Is a police officer a warrior at war with the community or a guardian of the safety of the citizens?

In Flint, Michigan, a sheriff, Chris Swanson, put down his riot gear and was invited by protesters to "walk with us." This sheriff opted to put off the agencies of a warrior and become one with his community, using instead the agencies of negotiation and identification.

Scene-Act Ratio

Of course, the larger question is whether the "scene" of American culture naturally produces acts like the killing of George Floyd. If we are going to define this act through a scene-act ratio, we have to define the circumference quite broadly because acts such as this happen to black people regularly throughout the country. Is racial prejudice and injustice an irredeemable, unerasable part of American society? Is the history of slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow, segregation, and institutional racism simply too powerful to overcome? I hope not. But overcoming it certainly can't be achieved by removing a few "bad apples" or retraining the police, though certainly those things should be done.

Identification and Division

For Burke, the most powerful rhetorical strategy is "identification." He says early in his book, *The Rhetoric of Motives*, contrasting it with the earlier *Grammar of Motives,* from which the ratios I was using above came, and the planned *Symbolic of Motives*, which was never finished

> The Rhetoric deals with the possibilities of classification in its partisan aspects; it considers the way in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another.

> Why "at odds," you may ask, when the titular term is "identification"? Because, to begin with "identification" is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of division. (22)

For Burke, rhetoric would not be necessary if there were not identifications and divisions. And he notes that such rhetoric often depends on "a body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to any exceptional rhetorical skill" (26).

We have been subjected to nearly four years of this sort of trivial repetition and dull reinforcement, all repeated in the name of division.

However, as I noted above, Sheriff Swanson of Flint, Michigan, at least for the moment, knocked down two divisive barriers, the black/white divide and the people/police divide, when he put down his battle gear and said, "We want to be with y'all for real so I took the helmet off and laid the batons down. I want to make this a parade, not a protest" (Taylor). We need more actions like this.

Conclusions

As Burke knew, we can never eliminate division from our society. Divisions and identifications are always being re-negotiated. But we are all human, and that is a starting point. We are all Americans too, but we have to be careful, lest we divide ourselves from the rest of the world. Identification starts with respect and builds with recognition of common goals and values. Understanding is often too much to expect, but we can try. At least we can try.

Addendum: Here are a couple of links that I think are quite powerful. A high school teacher who had been in one of my ERWC module development workshops sent me the first one. It's a powerful impromptu speech, full of pathos, but also arguing that protestors should channel their anger into working within the system, broken as it is. The teacher who sent it to me said, "It hits all the targets of rhetorical appeals in a profound way. I know my students will connect with it and perhaps be inspired to emulate its features in their own writing."

Rapper Killer Mike gives impassioned speech during Atlanta protests

This second piece is from filmmaker Kasi Lemmons. She says,

> As a filmmaker, I help people imagine what's it's like to be someone else, to experience things from a character's point of view — things they never will experience outside the theater. But when it comes to black life in America, there's only one conclusion I can reach about some white people: You don't care to put yourself in our shoes. The consequences of this lack of imagination for black Americans are deadly.

White Americans, your lack of imagination is killing us

Both of these pieces ask us to imagine the life of the other. I think that is a first step toward identification rather than division.

Works Cited

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