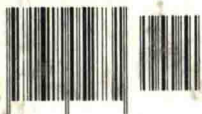




THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT MEDIA AND POLITICS

DONALD LAZERE





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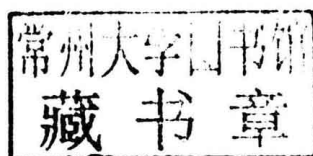
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Introduction

An Appeal to Students

Our culture places huge value on physical fitness. The media are filled every day with ads for building muscles or working off fat, and with dramatic images of self-defense. There are not many ads for, or dramatizations of, building our mental muscles, reducing the fat in our brain, or defending ourselves in argumentation. Shouldn't we be able to fight back against those trying to take verbal and intellectual advantage of us? This book is a survival guide for self-defense against manipulation by political, commercial, and other varieties of propaganda, as communicated through mass media.

The book is a spin-off of *Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy: The Critical Citizen's Guide to Argumentative Rhetoric*, a textbook primarily for the second term of first-year English classes or a more advanced course in argumentative writing. This version places less emphasis on the writing dimension and formal exposition of rhetorical terminology, in the hope that it will be useful in a wider range of college courses, including the social sciences, journalism, communications, and media criticism—in which it could be read either as a central text or as a supplement to more discipline-specific books. Exercises at the

end of sections stimulate thought, discussion, research, and writing assignments. Because much of the analysis of political arguments throughout the book emphasizes common fallacies in reasoning, the Appendix contains a glossary of logical fallacies, and the terms in that list are boldfaced throughout the text.

In recent years, best-seller lists have been filled with liberal and conservative polemics like Ann Coulter's *Slander: Liberal Lies about the American Right* and Al Franken's *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*. This phenomenon recalls George Orwell's judgment in "Politics and the English Language": "In our age, there is no such thing as 'keeping out of politics.' All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia" (*Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 256). Especially with the proliferation in the past few decades of partisan media of news and commentary on TV, radio, and the Internet, many Americans have been able to expose themselves only to sources of information that they already agree with and to shut out any contradictory viewpoints. (Even the most highly educated, scrupulous thinkers are innately captive to egocentric and ethnocentric biases on public controversies, needing to struggle constantly against those biases.) Those on the right and left shrilly accuse the other side of diabolically deceptive, monopolistic control of American politics, media, culture, and education, while portraying their own side as powerless, persecuted, and wholly virtuous. All sides claim to have irrefutable evidence proving they are telling the truth and their opponents are lying. So what are we to make of this dizzying, vicious circle of accusation? How can we possibly distinguish truth-tellers from liars?

This book aims to approach these questions through the application of principles of critical thinking and argumentative rhetoric—defined as the study of elements and patterns of persuasion, both scrupulous and unscrupulous ones (though popular usage tends to equate rhetoric solely with the latter). This approach to critical thinking and rhetoric also draws heavily from the study of semantics—emphasizing the role in argumentation of definition or denotation of terms, verbal slanting, and emotional appeal through connotative language, what I term **cleans and dirties**. For example, compare the different connotative "spins" in two responses to a 2007 U.S. Treasury Department report on trends in income mobility in America during the previous decade. An editorial in the conservative *Wall Street Journal* said, "Of those in the second lowest income quintile, nearly 50% moved into the middle quintile or higher. . . . This is a stunning show of upward mobility, meaning that more than half of all lower-income Americans

in 1996 had moved up the income scale in only 10 years.” But liberal columnist Eugene Robinson in the *Washington Post*, looking at the same figures, wrote, “An incredible 42 percent of children born into that lowest quintile are still stuck at the bottom, having been unable to climb a single rung of the income ladder.”

Semantic misunderstandings constantly result from liberals’ and conservatives’ different subjective viewpoints on, definitions of, and connotative spins on, the very words *liberal* and *conservative*, as well as related words like *capitalism*, *socialism*, and *democracy*. President Obama was widely identified by conservatives in polls as a “socialist,” “communist,” or “Marxist,” although such polls rarely asked the respondents how they defined those terms or what evidence justified them. At the same time, many liberals were denouncing Obama for selling out to Wall Street capitalists and for continuing the same conservative policies as President Bush on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, national security, and domestic surveillance. Chapter 2 approaches such semantic misunderstandings by presenting a glossary of political terms like these in all their complexities, ambiguities, and points of disagreement; the aim is to arrive at definitions that are agreed on by both liberals and conservatives, or leftists and rightists, so that they can at least agree about what they disagree about. Semantic study also emphasizes the open-ended nature of controversies between, say, conservatives and liberals. The journal of the Institute for General Semantics is titled *et cetera*, reflecting the principle that there is rarely any “last word” in such controversies but only a continuous sequence of rebuttals and counter-rebuttals. So at several points in the book students are asked explicitly or implicitly to try to find arguments that refute the arguments presented here.

POLITICS IS INTERESTED IN YOU

Thinking critically about politics and media has not been a central part of many modern Americans’ education or cultural formation. In fact, everything in our culture seems calculated to focus our thinking on anything *but* politics. At the very mention of the word “politics,” many students start groaning, “I’m just not interested in politics.” As a plea to persuade you not to turn off, let me argue that “politics” doesn’t just refer to dry matters of the branches of government, the structure of parties and electoral processes, and such. Many Americans believe their life and work are wholly personal matters and under their own control, and thus they can ignore what happens in the public

sphere; to the extent they are aware of larger national or international forces, they believe that those forces are beyond their understanding or control, hence not worth thinking about. You may not think you are interested in politics; however, politics is interested in *you*.

Americans were especially shocked by the events of September 11, 2001, because many had little or no knowledge of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization, the location of Afghanistan and Iraq where we were soon plunged into war, or the long-term political conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia that were necessary background for full understanding of these events. Among the reactions to the attacks was a widespread recognition that this was a wake-up call for Americans to make much more effort to educate themselves about historical and current events throughout the world, especially those in which America's government, military, and corporations are directly involved and in which the consequences of that involvement can change any of our personal lives. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, tens of thousands of young men and women in the armed services, many of whom had entered the military mainly for its vocational or educational opportunities, found themselves fighting in a distant part of the world for a cause they knew little about, other than what they had been indoctrinated in by their commanding officers, and in a foreign culture about whose language, religion, and customs they knew even less about. All these issues surrounding 9/11 and Iraq are "politics."

Shortly after teaching an American literature survey course at the University of Tennessee in spring 2004, in which we had briefly discussed the Iraq war in relation to Henry David Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience," I received the following e-mail from a student in the class:

I just wanted to tell you that I have gotten much more into politics since I started your class and feel that it has become more important to me now that I am getting older. The events in Iraq over the last few months have disturbed me very much in relation to the prisoner abuse and the beheadings. In addition, one of my closest friends from high school was killed in Iraq over the weekend and his death has very much disturbed me since I was so close to him. He was a U.S. Marine stationed and killed in Fallujah, and now I have another good friend who is being sent back to Iraq in the next few weeks. Now, I feel like all of this mess in Iraq was pointless and I am frustrated that my friend laid down his life for a fiasco. I finally feel like the whole situation in

Iraq has become very real to me after his death. It is very scary when people mention the possibility of a draft after a tragedy like this. I only wish we could have talked more about this in your class during the past semester.

Politics further includes controversies about *money*, a subject that interests everyone. We live today in a political economy in which personal concerns like the cost of living, availability of jobs, access to and cost of health care, tax policy, placement of and return on our investments (especially retirement pensions), are determined by national and international forces that we cannot afford to ignore. The concentration of corporate ownership in recent decades, the growing gap in the distribution of income, power, and taxation between the rich and the middle class and poor, and between big business and small, individual businesses—all of these directly influence everyone's daily life. Your ability to find a job in the location of your choice, and at the salary of your choice, may be determined by corporate mergers, downsizing, automation, movement of industries globally into cheap labor markets, and bankruptcies like those of Enron and Worldcom in the early 2000s and a whole host of financial institutions by 2010. Your family business or farm may be subject to a corporate takeover, or at least be affected by fluctuations in international stock and monetary markets, competition from companies that have moved to Third World countries with lower operating costs, or other forces in the global economy. As a character in the 1976 film *Network* puts it, "The totality of life on this planet" is now determined by "one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multi-variate, multinational dominion of dollars. . . . We are no longer an industrialized society; we aren't even a post-industrial or technological society. We are now a corporate society, a corporate world, a corporate universe" (130–135).

You are certainly concerned about the increasingly high cost of college tuition, textbooks, and housing; how much financial aid is available to you and at what cost; what part-time jobs are available to you as a student, how much they pay, and—above all—what your occupational and financial prospects are after you graduate. But how are public policies on all these matters determined, and by whom? Not by impersonal, uncontrollable forces like the weather. They are mostly controlled by human agents, by struggles for dominance between opposing political parties and ideologies (an ideology is a system of political concepts, such as liberalism and conservatism, or of economic concepts like capitalism and socialism); between interests representing corporate management versus those of employees;

between the public sector (government employees, schools and colleges, and other nonprofit organizations) and the private, for-profit sector (corporations and small businesses, professions like law and medicine); between supporters of a planned economy and of the free market, and so on. Whether you ever become conscious of it or not, you have the choice to become aware of the workings of all these forces and to attempt actively to influence them, or to go through a life controlled by them without your ever understanding or exerting any influence on them.

Beyond controversies over political economy, other issues like environmentalism, feminism and racism, affirmative action, abortion, gun control, and capital punishment are sometimes perceived as political, but it is often far from clear in public disputes over them that they all involve a dimension of partisan politics, along liberal versus conservative or left versus right ideological lines, though not always Democratic versus Republican party lines—as will be explained in Chapter 2. Indeed, a predictable pattern of political rhetoric is for those arguing about such issues to conceal the partisan nature of their arguments under a guise of nonpartisanship. Of course, not all public arguments fall into left versus right oppositions—but a lot *do*, and the failure of many citizens to perceive the nature of these oppositions can leave them without adequate understanding of the issues.

WHO MAKES THE RULES?

The Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1964, was set off in part by many students' frustration over the feeling that college education had become a process just to turn them into cogs in the machinery of business, professions, or government. The movement's most eloquent leader, twenty-two-year-old Mario Savio, asserted about the university,

The best among the people who enter must for four years wander aimlessly much of the time questioning why they are on campus at all, doubting whether there is any point in what they are doing, and looking toward a very bleak existence afterward in a game in which all of the rules have been made up—rules which we can not really amend.... The "futures" and "careers" for which American students now prepare are for the most part intellectual and moral wastelands. This chrome-plated consumers' paradise would have us grow up to be well-behaved children.

Do you too perhaps have the feeling that you are being educated to play a game, vocationally and politically, in which someone else has made all the rules? This book, then, attempts to present a beginning toward the kind of knowledge and critical skills you need, first to learn the language of those who make the rules, and ultimately to become an active participant in making them.

This kind of knowledge and critical skills begins with the value of opening your mind and broadening your perspective on the beliefs with which you were brought up. One way of doing that is to try to look at your beliefs in a new way: in regard to any belief that you are convinced is based on facts or the truth, ask yourself how you came to believe it is true. In other words, what is your viewpoint on it, and how did you acquire that viewpoint? From what sources of information did you get the belief—your family, teachers, peers, church, political leaders, news, entertainment, and advertising media? Others? Where did *those* sources get their beliefs? What might be the limitations or biases in your knowledge, and in that of your sources? Those sources' views are often colored by conscious or unconscious ethnocentrism, self-interest, and ideological biases, to say nothing of outright hype, **propaganda**, and deception on occasion. So we need to develop a critical perspective on *them* to evaluate their reliability. In contrast, then, to the common textbook approach that assumes faulty arguments result only from unintentional lapses in reasoning, this book confronts the hard truth that real-life arguments frequently contain deliberate deception, **special pleading**, partisanship, and out-and-out lying, as well as ideological biases that may be conscious or unconscious. The best safeguard against being taken in by the one-sided views of any particular medium of information, or any ideological line-up of media—liberal, conservative, libertarian, or socialist—is to recognize the need to broaden our acquaintanceship to a broader, more varied scope of media sources, along the lines suggested in Chapters 2 and 3.

Some students and teachers will react against this orientation by complaining that it is too “negative,” with all the emphasis on detecting and defending against deceptive, fallacious arguments. If you react this way, I urge you to ask yourself two questions as you are reading: Is this “negative” approach *realistic* in relation to the state of American public discourse? And does it succeed in enabling you to be a more critical and active participant in that discourse? An article titled “You’re On Your Own,” by Daniel Kadlec, which appeared in *Time* (January 28, 2002) after the collapse of Enron Corporation and its accountancy firm Arthur Andersen, presented an unusually

frank acknowledgment—especially in a magazine that has long been a booster of American free enterprise:

We are now responsible for so many decisions requiring so much homework that many of us feel helpless and paralyzed. The risks of inaction or unwise action are rising, even as many of the professionals on whom we would like to rely for guidance are proving untrustworthy and even corrupt.... We now know we can't trust stock analysts and financial planners, who often get paid more for selling us shaky stocks and mutual funds than for selling us solid ones.... The Enron scandal has shown us or perhaps reminded us that when money is involved, we are truly on our own. (24–25)

Finally, try to keep in mind that the purpose of training yourself to spot fallacious arguments is not to cynically dismiss each side in every dispute as equally fallacious, but to be able to distinguish invalid arguments from valid ones, liars from truth-tellers—so as to inspire you to give your wholehearted support to the truth-tellers.

Another response to the charge of negative thinking is that the prevailing emphasis in American society and education on “positive thinking” and “feeling good about yourself” can sometimes serve the function of ostrich-like **sentimentality** and denial of the gravity of our national problems. This point was addressed in an op-ed (an opinion column on the page opposite the editors' own editorials) by Michael Kinsley in the *Los Angeles Times* (June 22, 2004), following the death of President Reagan, titled “The Trouble with Optimism.” Kinsley wrote,

Thanks to Reagan, optimism is now considered an essential ingredient of any presidential candidate's public self-presentation.... Could there be an emptier claim made on behalf of someone hoping to lead the United States of America than to say that he is “optimistic”? Optimism may or may not be part of the American character, but it is pretty insufficient as either a campaign promise or a governing principle.... If forced to choose between a leader whose vision is clouded by optimism and one clouded by pessimism, there is a good case that pessimism is the more prudent choice. Another name for pessimism is a tragic sensibility. It is a vivid awareness that things can go wrong, and often have done so. An optimist thinks he can pop over to Iraq, knock Saddam Hussein off his perch, establish democracy