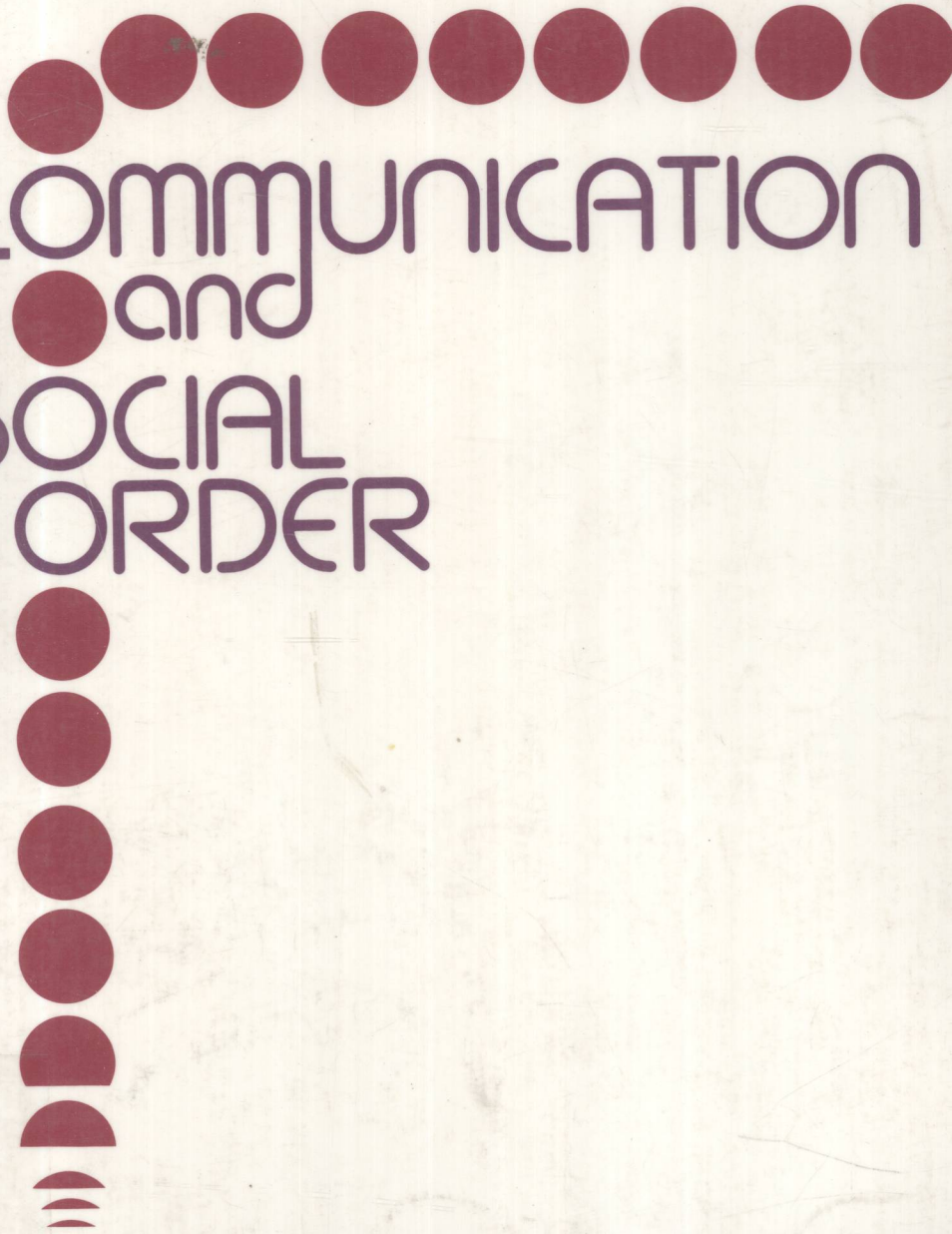
Hugh Dalziel Duncan



COMMUNICATION and SOCIAL ORDER

a new introduction by Carol Wilder

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HUGH DALZIEL DUNCAN

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Carol Wilder

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COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL ORDER

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To Hal, my friend of many years,
whose help brought my books into life,
and to his beloved wife, Ruthie,
who now lives among us in memory and in music.

Introduction to the Transaction Edition
Carol Wilder

How is social experience organized? How is social order expressed? In what ways do human motives become known? Can symbolic interaction be studied as a social fact? How can we come to understand the relationship between art and society, and its further relation to varieties of social order and disorder? And, centrally, how can we think at all about societal events unless we use forms of thought of how humans *communicate* as they act together in society?

The answers, argues Hugh Duncan in this classic work, lie in exploring the belief that "human communication in society is an attempt to create symbols whose use is believed to uphold social order." Moreover, it is not in attention to the content of symbols that a theory of communication and social action is to be found, but rather in symbolic forms, relationships, interactions. What are these symbolic forms? How can they be identified? How do they work, how do they operate, to create and sustain social order?

Communication and Social Order is Duncan's pathfinding attempt to clear the way for a theory of symbols in society, a theory which treats communication not as an epiphenomenon to be reckoned with only in passing, but as an activity which lies at the very heart of social experience. Kenneth Boulding, reviewing the first publication of this work for *Scientific American*, finds Duncan's central idea to be that "the dynamics of society cannot be understood without an understanding of the process of communication, by which the great artist changes the taste of millions, the dramatist arouses images that deflect the course of history and the orator stirs men to glory or to madness."[1]

Such a notion may not strike us as remarkable in the 1980s, when communicational models (e.g. loosely, Mead, Bateson, Kelly, Blumer, Watzlawick, Geertz, Goffman, Burke, Sullivan) have indisputably taken their place—albeit second place—in the social and behavioral sciences. Recall, however, that Duncan was writing *Communication and Social Order* more than two decades ago, at a time close to the height of fashion for mechanistic, quantifiable social theorizing and research. Duncan begins his argument virtually at square one because he is specifically challenging the formidable foe of Parsonian functionalism, a theory which relegates language to the status of a "mechanism" for

the transmission of culture, a mechanism sharing a role similar to that of money in Parsons's view.

Given the advantage we now have of hindsight over Duncan's full range of work, it becomes clear that *Communication and Social Order* serves in large measure as an extensive prologue to his systematic theoretical statement presented in *Symbols in Society,* written six years later. *Communication and Social Order* has all the hallmarks of a pioneering journey; here and there it falters or bewilders, here and there again we share a moment of inspired discovery. As such, this is not an easy book to travel through, not comfortable to travel with. Some of its byways turn out to be blind alleys and some of its treasure is hidden; Duncan leaves it to the reader to map the true course of his search for a theory of symbolic action which will unify our understanding of the creation and maintenance of social order.

Perhaps a brief look "ahead" to Duncan's system as articulated in *Symbols in Society* will reflect some light back upon the less orderly volume at hand. If *Communication and Social Order* can best be seen as an intellectual journey, *Symbols in Society* is surely Duncan's fullest account of the destination. This later work is structured around seventy-one propositions, twelve of which Duncan terms "axiomatic," with the remainder divided between "theoretical" and "methodological" propositions. It is the axiomatic propositions which are of most interest here, for these dozen statements taken together represent the credo Duncan courts without consummation in *Communication and Social Order.* Before turning to look directly at the present work, the axiomatic propositions of *Symbols in Society* merit repetition:

1. Society arises in, and continues to exist through, the communication of significant symbols.
2. Man creates the significant symbols he uses in communication.
3. Emotions, as well as thought and will, are learned in communication.
4. Symbols affect social motives by determining the forms in which the contents of relationships can be expressed.
5. From a sociological view motives must be understood as man's need for social relationships.
6. Symbols are directly observable data of meaning in social relationships.
7. Social order is expressed through hierarchies which differentiate men into ranks, classes, and status groups, and, at the same time, resolve differentiation through appeals to principles of order which transcend those upon which differentiation is based.

8. Hierarchy is expressed through the symbolization of superiority, inferiority, and equality, and of passage from one to the other.
9. Hierarchy functions through persuasion, which takes the form of courtship in social relationships.
10. The expression of hierarchy is best conceived through forms of drama which are both comic and tragic.
11. Social order is created and sustained in social dramas through intensive and frequent communal presentations of tragic and comic roles whose proper enactment is believed necessary to community survival.
12. Social order is always a resolution of acceptance, doubt, or rejection of the principles that are believed to guarantee such order.[2]

Note the key terms here: society, symbols, communication, motive, form, order, hierarchy, drama. Expressed discursively, society exists in and through the communication of symbolic forms, forms which determine the ways in which social motives can be expressed. Social order is inescapably hierarchical, and most suitably analyzed through a dramatistic representation. This is the case argued in the present volume.

Duncan is scrupulous in his payment of intellectual debts. Nearly all his final work, *Symbols and Social Theory*,[3] is devoted to this task, as is the first third of *Communication and Social Order*. Here Duncan summarizes the contributions to a theory of symbolic interaction made by Freud, Simmel, Malinowski, James, Dewey, Mead, and Burke. However labored the reader may find these excursions (Boulding writes that "it is as if the author were working a little too hard to establish his reference group"), Duncan's main points are worthy of mention here for the insight they provide into his subsequent formulations.

Sigmund Freud may seem a peculiar point of departure for the development of a theory of symbolic interaction, yet this is where Duncan begins. Freud's monadic, intrapsychic psychoanalytic theory is hardly helpful in understanding forms of relationships: Freud is the bête noire of contemporary family ("interactional") therapy. Family systems therapists and theorists (e.g. Gregory Bateson) most often present Freud and his interest in processes *within* people as a counterpoint to their concern with processes *between* people. Yet this distinction is not entirely lost on Duncan, who recognizes the limitations of Freud's emphasis on communication as cathexis and sees that "the basic problem for human scientists interested in social communication of how to explain emotion, not as motion but as communication, is not solved by Freud."

Duncan uses Freud, rather, because of the importance of symbols in his work. Freud may not be interactional, but he is surely symbolic. And while Freud may have "refused to study motivation in terms of symbols, he often illustrated what he had studied and conclusions he had reached, through illustrations drawn from symbolic works." Duncan draws a distinction between Freud's theorizing and his exemplifications: "It is not so much Freud's theory of repression, but his remarks on the expression of the repression, which are significant to those seeking to develop a theory of social action based on communication." Duncan is especially taken with Freud's treatment of jokes, dreams, and the unconscious elements in communication, pointing to the fact that many illustrations of condensations and displacement reveal the involvement of social as well as sexual elements. Duncan also externalizes Freud's dream censor to become the conscious audience of address. Duncan is taken with Freud's symbolic descriptions "as a *source* for the development of a specific sociological approach, but a source is only a beginning."

Were Duncan to have examined the work of Georg Simmel a decade after writing *Communication and Social Order,* he likely would have attended more closely to Simmel's theorizing about social conflict, a major concern of Simmel's which receives little notice here. Later, at least by 1970, Duncan could state clearly that "a model of rhetoric as used in a democratic society must be a conflict rhetoric."[4] Herein, however, Duncan invokes Simmel to exploit the potential of a focus on social *forms.* Simmel's search for a "pure form of sociation" led him to consider the varieties of human play, where form achieves autonomy from material causes and can thus be studied in its purest sense: In conversation we talk for the sake of talking, at parties we socialize for the sake of socializing, we flirt for the sake of flirting. It is no accident, suggests Duncan, that we place so much emphasis on "good form" in social relationships. Sociability is the "primary sociological category": It has no objective purpose, no content, and no extrinsic results. Tact, manners, discretion, and the like are forms which constitute primary data for the drama of social relationships. Play is to reality as art is to reality, for both activities can be represented as pure form. Content is important ("the subject of talk must be interesting and fascinating"), but in all cases is subordinated to form, in this instance meaning the rules which govern social discourse.

Yet in the end, Simmel falls short of developing a theory of symbolic interaction. Art and play are used by Simmel to illustrate rather than to constitute his social theory, a theory at its roots mechanical rather than

symbolic. Simmel "reduces social process to a natural process." Just as Duncan found Freud's focus on symbols useful despite the limitations of psychoanalytic theory, he finds Simmel's attention to form of value even though it stops short of a full symbolic theory.

Malinowski comes closer to presenting a social theory of communication by making language an organizing principle of society. Language is a "mode of action," and no meaning can be ascertained apart from an understanding of the "context of situation." Utterance carries no intrinsic significance. Meaning is not contained *within* symbols; it is to be found in the *relationship* of symbols to social context. Purely social talk, where the talk itself becomes self-referentially the context, Malinowski calls "phatic communication." And beyond pragmatic language and social talk lies Malinowski's special interest, the language of magic. The magical act, with its distinctive form and context and rhetorical function, provides a rich source of data for the analysis of communication processes. In the end, however, Malinowski's strict attention to magical communication—an essentially authoritarian mode—limits the range of his contribution by neglecting the dialectical and rhetorical functions of language so central to democratic social organization. Also, in Duncan's view, Malinowski disregards art, form, and the relationship between language and social change, further restricting his contribution.

James, Dewey, and Mead turned social philosophy around by arguing that the way in which people express themselves about their experience *is* their experience. While there may well exist some form of experience behind the "veil of words," all we can observe—hence all that can constitute a science of society—is what people *say.* James viewed religion from this perspective: Religious experience exists in its expression, regardless of what sorts of "laws" may be said to be operating behind the scenes.

But what forms does this data of expression assume which best allow of symbolic analysis? Duncan decisively chooses art here, a form of expression "unique among the acts of men because it is both instrumental and consummatory." Duncan singles out John Dewey because of the centrality of art to his theory of social action. Art integrates consummatory and instrumental aspects of events, giving the meaning to experience which is essential to social communication. The artist, through creating "forms which make possible participating in community life," thus creates also social interaction. The study of art replaces the study of the supernatural in Dewey's scheme; perhaps art is the most refined form of observable human expression. Duncan faults Dewey for not

providing a functional model of art in society, for telling *what* communication as art in society does but not *how* this is accomplished.

Far more functional is the work of George Herbert Mead, who addressed interaction between self and society as a primary concern. Interpersonal reality is a socially bestowed phenomenon. To become conscious of self one must learn to take the attitude of others, to stand as an object to oneself. The complicated games and role plays through which self is created and maintained can be represented by a dramatic model: "The basic *form* of communication as a social act, whatever its content, is histrionic."

Duncan acknowledges Mead's great importance and sketches these roots of symbolic interactionism in some detail, but in the end finds Mead to be excessively optimistic and theoretically inconsistent. Despite Mead's extensive considerations of the relationship of art to communication, "he never really tells us how art arises in, and continues to exist in, communication in society, and what likenesses and differences exist between art and the social as categories of experience."

One wonders—What thinker can satisfy Duncan? Who comes closest to the mark by embracing the notions we by now know are crucial for him: symbol, form, context, art, interaction? For his conceptual mentor, Duncan joins a handful of other sociologists (Erving Goffman, Clifford Geertz, Joseph Gusfield) in choosing master symbolist Kenneth Burke. Duncan's dual interest in literary criticism and social theory made Burke a natural choice, for despite the literary apparel of Burke's prose he is at root a social philosopher, interested in "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."

Burke considers human behavior in terms of drama; these terms begin in theories of action rather than theories of knowledge. Society is a dramatistic process in which hierarchy forms structure through power relationships. When hierarchy has a definite organization it is "bureaucratized" and then there is order in society. It is this bureaucratization of hierarchy resulting in order which makes hierarchy the structure of society. Hierarchy embodies authority, upon which three attitudes may be brought to bear: acceptance, rejection, or doubt. Acceptance begets satisfaction and order; rejection begets alienation and disorder. Langauge allows rejection because of its "peculiar possibility of the negative." Guilt results when hierarchy is rejected; guilt is inherent in society—class conflict is inherent in hierarchy. Guilt compels purification through either mortification (self-sacrifice) or victimization (scapegoating), both of which lead to redemption.

If the function of an act can be explained in terms of hierarchy, guilt, victimization, and redemption, its structure can be discussed in terms of Burke's "dramatistic pentad": Terms of the pentad are act (what was done), scene (when or where it was done), agent (who did it), agency (how it was done), and purpose (why it was done). The pentad is both divided and unified, analogous to the hand, and all components are interrelated in some ratio. For instance, scene and agent reciprocally relate such that social context shapes the behavior of actors who in return determine the scene. Or again, act and purpose manifest their relationship when "the end of action and action itself are congruent," as in the Indochinese war policy of destroying a village in order to save it.

Duncan's debt to Burke is one of both style and substance. Those who object to the religiosity of Burke's language will find little reprieve in Duncan, who likewise adopts something of a transcendent vocabulary. Duncan also resembles Burke in his sometimes maddening pursuit of every turn an idea may take, a dizzying habit of mind to the reader in search of the "point." Nothing comes easy from either of these hybrid thinkers, and the audience is not exempted from sharing the labor of discovery. Duncan and Burke both write as if to omit the slightest implication may squander a diamond in the rough. The density and richness of this sort of writing may account in no small measure for the slight that social and communication theorists have handed both thinkers, despite the fact that as early as 1935 Louis Wirth (Duncan's Ph.D. adviser) introduced Burke to the sociological community via a highly praiseworthy review of *Permanence and Change* for the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Alas, here we are nearly half a century later gathered to witness the resurrection of a work in the Burkean tradition which has received far less than its due. And having said quite enough about most of Duncan's forbears, it remains to explore the story of *Communication and Social Order* as it unfolds both in and between the lines.

Communication and Social Order was more than a decade in the making; Duncan wrote at least five full drafts of the work beginning in the early 1950s, substantially shifting the conceptual center over the years. The seed of the work was no doubt planted even earlier, perhaps as early as 1938 when Duncan fell under the spell of Kenneth Burke, who led him in a Psychology of Poetic Form seminar at the University of Chicago, a fateful day: It was at this time that Duncan initiated what was to become a lifelong correspondence with Burke, much of which pertains to Duncan's long struggle to articulate the position he comes to take in *Communication and Social Order*. The position, as I understand it,

comes to this: Social order is inescapably hierarchical, presuming the existence of superiors, inferiors, and equals. Hierarchy begets classes, and the differences between classes allow a form of miscommunication—mystification—which it is the function of the social order to maintain. Yet there seems to be a basic human instinct toward community, synthesis, and equality. And while it is the office of most social forms (as diverse as government bureaucracy and conversational rules for politeness) to uphold the status quo, selected forms such as play and humor provide opportunities for safely challenging the prevailing order. Both play and humor function within frames which metacommunicate the message "don't take this seriously," thus much of the most serious hierarchy-goading information can be communicated while simultaneously being denied. This activity can take the guise of an editorial cartoon, a political satirist, or witticisms about the "boss" traded over a beer, but in any case the effect is a demystification—however passing—of class difference.

When Duncan hits his stride in the present volume—about halfway through—it becomes evident that he has embraced hierarchy as his central image and comic art as his key exemplification, emphases which took years to mature. To understand this process with a view toward fuller appreciation of Duncan's work, a look at extant papers from the decade-long development of *Communication and Social Order* is revealing.

At least three full outlines from various writing stages of *Communication and Social Order* survive, offering special insight into a major thinker at work. Taken together, these outlines (from 1954, 1956, and 1960) display clearly that Duncan labored mightily to find a key image or theme which would ground and unify the work. Three major themes of the book which underwent major transformations during its development were art, comedy, and hierarchy.

As early as 1951 Duncan wrote to Kenneth Burke that "obviously, my own work is a search for some kind of statement of society in terms of communication."[5] Interestingly, this same letter also includes the first of Duncan's many exhortations to Burke to write on the subject of comedy, advice Duncan somewhat later took to heart for himself by making comedy his case study of communication and social order. But in 1951, Duncan was trying to parcel the topic out. He wrote to Burke:

> I wish you would turn over in your mind a statement about comedy. It might actually be a purge for our times. And it might take a little of the sanctimonious air away from the way we are all beginning to talk about talk. Mencken, the merry semanticist, is the only one I know who depicts the verbal scramble as a scuffle in a world populated by W.C. Fields and his

phonies, or maybe we should begin laughing at some others. At any rate the comic muse should be invited to leave the boys in the back room for a while. But again maybe she is in safer hands there. . .[6]

This closing amvibalence may provide a clue as to why Duncan was so long in coming to a treatment of comedy himself, while at the same time his frequent urgings to Burke to join the fray suggest the abiding value he placed on serious treatment of the subject.

By 1952, the theme of hierarchy was becoming salient in Duncan's thinking, as it had been all along for Burke. While struggling with an early draft of *Communication and Social Order,* Duncan wrote to Burke that "you are the only one I know who keeps to the central problem: how status arises in and through communication."[7] Moving into the thick of contemplation on the subject, Duncan queries:

How are we to keep a pious attitude toward criticism of hierarchy? Weber suggests (and Parsons paraphrases this) criticism is a means-end relationship as the end of reason (over social relationships). Granted, but how do we create and sustain the necessary pieties toward reason. . . . I suppose all you can say is that whatever is conscious, that is whatever is "open to reason," in conditions where reason is a value, will be safe. Yet as Mannheim stresses we must be careful to note who "owns" reason. As you point out, reason is not without its own magic, as in the scientific labs, the professor's office, etc., where there is great authority and the most rigid hierarchy I have known. Even the army was very flexible about transfers from one unit, branch, etc., to another, but the learned professions assume that each professor is making a unique contribution to knowledge, at the same time they assume that the professor alone is competent to judge what others are accomplishing as contributions to knowledge. Here again the only way out of this impasse is open criticism. Suggestion: All theses be passed by boards of critics drawn from various fields and approved at annual conventions of learned bodies. Wow![8]

The personal turn and urgent tone of Duncan's musings on hierarchy here make it come as no surprise when he later places the notion centrally. The vision of society here is an open one, one in which all formal institutions are vulnerable to criticism, one in which it is a right if not a duty to "question authority."

Another feature of this especially impressive letter merits note, for here is the first time in Duncan's correspondence with Burke that he links his three major themes of art, comedy, and hierarchy:

On the whole I think that art is the best corrective [for hierarchy]. The more I think about our great clowns and the richness of American laughter the more I am convinced that an open society can remain fairly healthy as long as it subsidizes laughter. Perhaps there is nothing more profound about reason than laughter. At least in the reduction of psychoses attendant to hierarchy laughter is, to use a hierarchical term, the sovereign remedy. I know that it is necessary at times to have tragedy. The *Passions* of Bach are to me the great

counterpart of the Greek tragedy (the role of the congregation, the great choruses, etc.). But I think the Christian tradition was so rooted in the notion that the world, when all was said and done, must be written off and we must prepare ourselves here for the next, that it becomes highly unusable as a secular ethic. Confucius, Rabelais, Montaigne, Erasmus, and on a more popular level now, Chaplin, W.C. Fields, Krazy Kat, and the terrible irony of Kafka where he chides himself for trying to make sense out of a hierarchy essentially senseless, strike me as very useful.[9]

The representations evoked by art are the safeguards of equality, hence of democracy, and in Duncan's view it is the art of laughter, not of tears, which opens the true path through the hierarchical maze he takes as given.

Duncan's 1954 outline of *Communication and Social Order*—then titled *Art and Social Hierarchy*—shows relatively scant evidence of this art-comedy-hierarchy relationship when compared to the final manuscript. More than half of the fifty chapter heads and subheads of this outline include the word *art,* but *hierarchy* is mentioned only six times (in subheads) and *comedy* is not mentioned at all. Mead, Burke, and Freud are included here, but receive nowhere close to the attention they are given in the final version. The two points here which become most important in *Communication and Social Order*—"mysteries of hierarchy opened to reason through art" and "communication of hierarchy as basic sociological function of art"—are both relegated to minor status in this early outline. At this stage it appears that Duncan is using art as a lens through which to view communication, a position later radically transformed when communication—symbolic interaction—becomes the lens itself.

By 1956 Duncan's focus had changed dramatically. In June of that year he wrote to Burke, by now a monthly correspondent, reporting:

I am deep in hierarchy. All sorts of models of hierarchic action flit through my head. Once you have a scheme it is amazing how it can be turned and looked at in various ways. The trouble is, what does it have to do with experience?[10]

Burke had earlier given Duncan a bit of advice on the question of hierarchy:

Incidentally, as regards the hierarchy bizz, might it add up to this: The old-time reactionaries and conservatives affirmed the great desirability of hierarchy: progressives, liberals, revolutionaries, nihilists, etc., affirmed its evil and variously promised its abolishment; dramatism would simply study it neutrally, as a major "fact."[11]

It is evident that Duncan is closer to finding his center when he can ask:

How can we open the mystifications and the linkages of hierarchy to some kind of method like the Socratic? The only hope I see is comedy, sports, and play, where in the guise of fun we can think about what we must be very solemn about in other phases of action.[12]

An outline of *Communication and Social Process* written in approximately 1956 reflects Duncan's shifting emphasis. "Art" is now dropped from the working title, which reads *Social Hierarchy: A Sociological Essay on the Expression of Social Hierarchy in Symbolic Phases of Communication.* "Hierarchy," rather than gaining mention in one-tenth of the chapter headings as in 1964, now appears in nearly half of them. Conversely, "art," which held a similar high position in the earlier outline, now shows in but one-seventh of the headings. And comedy at last appears, albeit one time only. Duncan is closing in on his goal.

Kenneth Burke played a major role in the development of *Communication and Social Order,* both indirectly as theoretical (one is almost tempted to say "spiritual") mentor and directly as an exceptionally thorough manuscript reviewer. In 1955, Burke wrote:

Started your manuscript some time back, and found it convincing but perhaps a bit too ranging. However, that reservation will certainly be modified if you subsequently come to rest on the building of some asseveration, without giving a poop about any of us. You are too considerate, sir.[13]

While Duncan never seemed to overcome the excessive consideration of his forbears as writ large in his exhaustive presentations of their key ideas, he did, at this point, come to rest on the asseveration that social reality is a *symbolic* construction whose form is hierarchical, whose process is dialectical, and whose most telling expression is to be found in comic art.

Burke's most extensive critique of *Communication and Social Order* survives in the form of a twelve-thousand-plus-word letter written in 1955.[14] While generally supportive, Burke (with characteristic thoroughness) comments on everything from the broadest focus of the work to incidences of awkward sentence structure. Several samples of middle-level criticism should suffice in communicating the flavor of Burke's approach:

Incidentally, another notion is beginning to occur to me. Might the best architecture of a period be towards serenity, or some such, precisely when the best drama is toward bellyache? As per the poet who loves to get himself comfortably settled by the fire and weep bitterly for all mankind.

Maybe our difference (if there is one!) is this: I would approach art in terms of symbol-using. You would approach it in terms of communication. The two greatly overlap, but they