

Informed, Passionate, and Disorderly: Uncivil Rhetoric in a New Gilded Age

Nancy Welch

Little known about the now celebrated 1912 Bread and Roses strike is that prominent Progressive-era reformers condemned the strikers as “uncivil” and “violent.” An examination of Bread and Roses’ controversies reveals how a ruling class enlists middle-class sentiments to oppose social-justice arguments and defend a civil order—not for the good of democracy but against it. The strikers’ inspiring actions to push against civil boundaries and create democratic space can challenge today’s teachers of public writing to question the construction of civility as an acontextual virtue and consider the class-struggle uses of unruly rhetoric for our new Gilded Age.

Civility may well be a virtue. But it is probably not a virtue that will be of much help in deciding the political questions that ultimately matter.

—James Schmidt, “Is Civility a Virtue?”

It was the spirit of the workers that seemed dangerous. They were confident, gay, released, and they sang ... The gray tired crowds ebbing and flowing perpetually into the mills had waked and opened their mouths to sing, the different nationalities all speaking one language when they sang together.

“Revolution!” screamed the conservative press.

—Mary Heaton Vorse, “The Lawrence Strike” in
A Footnote to Folly: The Reminiscences of Mary Heaton Vorse

The Truthiness About Indian Point

Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) officials were in for a shock when, not three months after the Fukushima catastrophe, they arrived in Cortlandt Manor, New York, to give their annual safety debriefing on the Indian Point nuclear power plant. The overflow crowd of more than four hundred—a startling turnout for the tiny town—carried signs imploring “Westchester Aglow—Where Do We Go?” They refused to sit still for the usual PowerPoint presentation. “Lap dogs!” and “Liars!” they shouted when officials claimed that the aging, accident-ridden plant had “operated in a manner that preserved public health and safety” (Clary; Williams). Finally the NRC officials gave the crowd what they had politely requested at the

meeting's start: two minutes of silence for Fukushima's victims and suspension of the PowerPoint presentation, available online, so the meeting could proceed straight to Q&A. "Raucous" is how the local newspaper reporter summed up the open mic that followed. "Boisterous" and "confident" wrote environmental activist and Pace University professor Chris Williams. "[O]ne of the best public meetings I ever attended," declared local blogger Dawn Powell. The more than eighty people who stepped up to the microphone, she reported, were "informed, passionate, and empowering."

Less than three weeks later, however, this same meeting was roundly criticized by highly regarded anti-nuclear activist Raymond Shadis. In a public radio interview and on a Vermont news blog, Shadis decried the conduct of the Indian Point meeting attendees as "completely disorderly" (Dillon). Their rhetoric, he charged, had veered toward "irresponsible" incitement to "violence" (Shadis). Shadis' purpose in going public with this reprimand wasn't simply epideictic. Rather, it was deliberative, aiming to shape audience behavior at the NRC's next stop: Brattleboro, Vermont, in the shadow of the 39-year-old Vermont Yankee nuclear reactor. Coming on the eve of federal court hearings to determine whether to set aside the state senate's 26-to-4 decision to shutter the plant, the Vermont meeting promised to be fraught. Adding to the tension was the revelation that the NRC had taken sides, joining with Entergy, the corporation that also owns Indian Point, to argue for keeping Vermont Yankee open. This was the context in which Shadis urged "civility" and "calm" among Vermonters lest "violent language ... stimulate violent action" (Dillon). To be sure, Shadis acknowledged, the NRC should cease advancing unconvincing claims about reactor safety that only serve to "insult and infuriate" the public (Shadis). Infuriating, for instance, has been the NRC's downplay of the partial collapse of a cooling tower at Yankee and the leakage of radioactive tritium into the groundwater from pipes Entergy disavowed any knowledge of (Zeller). But "upset members of the public too," Shadis concluded, "need to find better means to communicate" (Shadis).

Shadis' counsel, especially as it came in the aftermath of the appalling shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, has strong persuasive appeal. That appeal is further bolstered by his reputation as an effective activist—he led the successful movement to end nuclear power in his home state, Maine—and by his practical wisdom in advocating keeping communication channels open. Through ethos alone, Shadis' statements have a resounding ring of truth, and his plea for civility received wide broadcast, the story published under the headline "Nuclear Critic Urges Civility" on news websites nationwide. Undisclosed, however, is that Ray Shadis did not attend the Indian Point hearing. Instead, he was "contacted indirectly by members of [the] NRC" who were concerned about "the safe and civil conduct of NRC public meetings" because the "personal attacks" at the Indian Point meeting led "younger staffers" to fear for their "physical safety" and a possible repeat of "the Representative Giffords shooting" as a "mob mentality takes over" (Shadis). In his op-ed and radio interview, Shadis makes no mention of having contacted any of Indian Point's non-NRC meeting participants. He seems also not to have consulted the local newspaper, the handful of independent media outlets covering the meeting, and the shift reports of local police officers, none of which recorded violent language or threatening behavior. Compared with eye-witness accounts, Shadis' single-source and apparently

corporate-spun message starts to ring not with truth but with what comedian Stephen Colbert dubs "truthiness."

But no matter. With the Indian Point hearing having received such limited coverage while the Shadis interview enjoyed wide circulation, the NRC's version of the event takes on its own reality. In place of Raging Grannies belting out "Indian Point / Is a dangerous joint" and a state assemblywoman reminding the NRC, "It's your job to protect the public, not the industry" ("Raging Grannies Against Indian Point"; Clary), we have the frightening prospect of "deranged individuals" overtaken by a "mob mentality." "Shut it down" becomes not the open demand of an informed and passionate public but the concealed goal of a private industry and its quasi-governmental defenders aiming to shut down audible protest—and to do so in the name of civility.

What's Wrong with Just Being Civil

"If you would civil your land, first you should civil speech": Auden's adage is at the heart of Wayne Booth's influential "rhetoric of assent" or "listening rhetoric," first formulated from his dismay at the civil unrest of the late 1960s and later offered as a remedy for a country that had just marched under false warrants into war (*Modern Dogma; Rhetoric; "War Rhetoric"*). Theresa Enos likewise turns to Auden as she recommends rhetorical restraint to create greater space for deliberation and deeper respect between contending parties. If "we can work toward more constructive, and civil, ways of expressing opposition," especially by "suspending urgency," she suggests, parties to a conflict can open themselves to the "spaciousness of rhetoric" and create "greater comity" between them (151). Many first-year composition courses, writes John Duffy in *Inside Higher Education*, are already engaged in the work of creating rhetorical spaciousness and generosity, offering their students Aristotelian lessons in argument and ethics that can counteract the "corrosive language of figures such as Rush Limbaugh" and move us toward "healthier, more productive, and more generous forms of public argument." Especially given the toxicity of what passes for public discourse on corporate radio and cable-news broadcasts, the projects of cultivating civility and opening rhetorical space appear interdependent. Hence the rekindled interest among compositionists in civic literacy and public rhetoric along with a pedagogical emphasis on rhetorical listening, balance, and civility.

The story of the Indian Point meeting, however, troubles the belief in civility's powers to create conditions and space needed for democratic deliberation and the power of well-reasoned, proof-backed claims alone to advance effective arguments for the public good. Consider: The Indian Point residents and activists arrived at this meeting equipped with meticulously researched arguments regarding the dangers of and alternatives to nuclear power. In this way, they were much like the members of a citizens group Jeff Grabill describes in "On Being Useful: Rhetoric and the Work of Engagement." Members of that group undertook painstaking research to challenge the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' claim that a proposed dredging project would have no adverse environmental and health effects. Such rhetorical preparation—not the work of lone rhetors, Grabill emphasizes, but "coordinated and distributed" across many people—is necessary for groups without official credentials and backing to

make arguments that can “open up” dredging a canal or relicensing a nuclear power plant as a “matter of concern” (203-4).

In the case of Indian Point, however, something more was also needed: the audience’s ability and willingness, likewise coordinated and distributed, to rival the NRC’s authority to relegate audience arguments to the meeting’s end. By refusing to await the designated Q&A period, these audience members were indeed “uncivil” in two conventional senses of the term: incivility as indecorous behavior and incivility as refusal to subordinate one’s grievances to the presumed greater good of maintaining order (Shils, *The Virtue of Civility* 4, 345). Yet in this case their incivility served to *make* rhetorical space in which more views could be heard. They sought to civil their land—or at least this meeting—by *unciviling* their speech.¹

Why uncivil, even rude speech was necessary, a precondition for a democratic discussion, is captured by David Lochbaum of the Union of Concerned Scientists: “Absent dead bodies,” he told the *New York Times*, “nothing seems to deter the NRC from sustaining reactor operation” (Zeller). In these circumstances, civility toward spokespersons for the nuclear industry may be a virtue—but not one in service to democracy. Instead civility functions to hold in check agitation against a social order that is undemocratic in access to decision-making voice and unequal in distribution of wealth. Indeed, a *neoliberalized* regulatory body like the NRC—one that understands its purpose not as regulating an industry to safeguard the public good but influencing public opinion to safeguard an industry (Associated Press; Gonzales and Goodman; Zeller)—*depends* on civility to *curtail* rhetorical spaciousness.² Faced with working- and middle-class individuals and groups joined to oppose a corporation’s considerable political power and economic resources, NRC officials deployed the accusation of incivility and the specter of mob violence as a regulatory force, one aimed at discrediting meeting attendees and discouraging future audiences from pushing for a democratic agenda. Through its calls for calm, the NRC effectively shifted the focus and the topic: from Entergy’s conduct to the audience’s and from public rights to social manners.

Is This What Democracy Looks Like?

The use of civility as a bulwark against agitation for the expansion of democratic rights isn’t unique to the neoliberal era. It was in the interest of polite peace, observes James Schmidt, that Congress adopted the infamous “gag rule” of 1836 against any discussion of slavery or abolition (36). In his classic *Civilities and Civil Rights*, William Chafe examines how the white progressives of 1960 Greensboro, North Carolina, prided themselves on “being hospitable to new ideas” so long as no actual move toward integration was required (7). Half a century later, Barack Obama presents himself as hospitable to discussion when it comes to LGBT marriage while at the same time he relies on the Jim Crow warrant of states’ rights to justify federal inaction.³ Although civility can smooth dialogue about contentious issues between people *already* meeting on a plane of equality and respect, in these examples we also see its history of enabling “timid acquiescence” to inequality to masquerade as “reasonable compromises in the name of the public good” (Schmidt 37).

This history of civil accommodation to injustice, argues Ellen Meiksins Wood, isn’t incidental to but constitutive of liberal democracy with its elevation of private rights, especially property rights, above public. The “liberal” in liberal democracy is specifically *economic* liberalism where individual “liberty”—the freedom of the market, the right of owners to exploit the resources in their control for maximum profit—trumps “rule by the *demos*” (Chapter 7 *passim*). Even as historically excluded groups have won juridical recognition and political enfranchisement, Wood points out, the institutions and ideas of a liberal or capitalist democracy ensure that “many varieties of oppression and indignity” have been “left untouched by political equality” (224) and that “vast areas of our daily lives...are not subject to democratic accountability but governed by the powers of property and the ‘laws’ of the market, the imperatives of profit maximization” (234). Hence, while liberal democracy’s celebrated tenets—the civil-liberties brake on state absolutism, for instance—appear to enable expansive democratic participation, at liberalism’s historic heart is fortification from democratic interference. And while civility in manners and speech would appear to be a desirable precondition for democratic deliberation, civility also serves in a liberal democracy as a powerful ideological tool by a propertied class seeking to curtail the public participation that might also result in a more expansive conception of public rights. This participation-inhibiting civility is the “substantive civility” that the conservative Chicago School thinker Edward Shils championed as protecting liberal democracy from such threats as “collectivist liberalism,” “emancipationism,” “populism,” and “egalitarianism” (Shils, *The Virtue of Civility* 4-5, 345).⁴ Such civility, in service to preserving an unjust social order, is also what more than two centuries of collectivist, populist, and emancipatory movements have contested, resulting in measurable expansions of who is included in the political sphere and what democratic rights and social-justice oversight can be exercised in the economic.

What I’d like to turn to now is a chapter from one such movement for social and economic justice: the 1912 Bread and Roses strike. As a rhetorician concerned with how working-class and oppressed groups create space and means to exercise public voice, I’m drawn to the U.S. Progressive era because its conditions suggest how neoliberalism’s diminished conception of democracy doesn’t mark a brand-new development but instead a *restoration*, a return to the constricted conception of public rights and public good that likewise defined civil society in the first Gilded Age. For coming to terms with Indian Point’s lessons for public rhetoric, a look back to Bread and Roses seems particularly instructive because unfettered corporate power and the civic institutions poised to protect that power are likewise what the immigrant workers of Lawrence, Massachusetts, were taking on. This they did with the scantest of means, making this strike a celebrated chapter in U.S. social history. What few of us learn in school, however, is that the strike also drew sharp rebuke—not just from the robber barons whose dominion the strikers challenged but also from prominent Progressive era reformers who accused the workers of using violence to press their argument. What was the danger to civil society this strike posed? What makes the assertion “We Want Bread and Roses Too” *violent*? A fuller story of this strike illustrates the unruly rhetoric that has been necessary to challenge civil boundaries of a civil society that would shield vast realms of injustice from democratic reckoning. A

fuller examination of the strike's controversies, especially the Settlement Movement's condemnation of strikers for their "incivility," also reveals how a ruling class enlists middle-class sentiments to oppose social-justice arguments and defend a civil order not for the good of democracy but against it.

"A College for the Workers"

"People who have never seen an industrial struggle," observed labor journalist Mary Heaton Vorse, "think of a strike as a time of tumult, disorder and riot. Nothing could be less true. A good strike is a college for the workers" (*Footnote* 11-12). The strike to which she refers and which she covered as a young reporter for *Harper's Weekly* is the Lawrence textile strike during the bitterly cold winter of 1912. Sparked by a 30-cents-a-week pay cut to a workforce already living on starvation's edge, that now-fabled strike was carried out by some 25,000 workers, primarily women and teens, coming from more than two dozen ethnic groups speaking some 50 different languages—"all the peoples of the earth," Vorse told her *Harper's* readers, "of warring nations and warring creeds" ("Trouble" 32). The next nine weeks would demonstrate that the immigrant workers shunned by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) could unite against such daunting forces as the powerful Wool Trust monopoly and J.P. Morgan, whose American Woolen Company ran Lawrence's largest mills.

"Better to starve fighting than to starve working": This assertion by mill workers, whose average wage was less than \$6 a week and whose life expectancy was half that for a Lawrence lawyer or minister, was no hyperbole (Vorse, "Trouble" 31; *Tax* 243). The strikers' desperate economic demands were also inseparable from a political demand for recognition by a society that regarded them, the mills where they worked, and the mill-owned tenements where they lived as the manufacturers' private property shielded from public interference. It wasn't only mill owners who viewed Lawrence's workers as little more than extensions of the looms they operated. A Lawrence minister and charity society official, for instance, denied any difference between "ball playing and bobbin tending, school work and mill work, as long as the child was occupied" (Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All* 231). When Vorse interviewed "the principal men of the town and all the ministers and several prominent women," they insisted that the workers were "pigs" who "preferred to live as they did to save money" (*Footnote* 18).

Against such ruling sentiments the strikers asserted, "We Want Bread and Roses Too." The nation would be made "to see that we are something more than mere textile workers, but are human beings," proclaimed Joseph Ettor of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the radical new labor movement under whose banner the strike was waged (Palmer 1697). How the Lawrence workers with the IWW made a nation hear their arguments—making this strike a college for all students interested in learning how social justice arguments are pressed and won—is the subject of numerous histories and memoirs (e.g., Dubofsky, Flynn, Foner, Kornbluh, *Tax*, Vorse). Here I'll focus on the strikers' commitments to mass participation and strike democracy that *both* created the conditions for comity—recognition of Lawrence's workers and regard for their arguments—and unleashed backlash arguments equating their mass democratic action with riotous behavior and mob violence.

The strike's earliest hours did include window- and machinery-smashing by workers outraged to have been shorted "four loaves of bread" in their weekly pay (Palmer 1690). But as the city banned standing pickets and the state called in twenty-four infantry companies and cavalry troops—one filled with Harvard students reportedly happy to accept strike-suppression duty in exchange for Cs in their courses ("Harvard Men")—the strikers turned to mass participation coupled with the principle of "folded arms" or nonviolence as their most practical means to resist the city's and state's repressive forces. To foster across a multiethnic, multilingual workforce the unity needed for nonviolence to become a reckoning force, they set up a strike committee with 56 representatives from each of the ethnic groups; the biggest questions were decided through mass assemblies of all strikers. The commitment to full participation extended across gendered boundaries with women serving on the general strike committee, leading mass pickets, and confounding police who lamented that "there were no leaders in the streets ... The crowds on the street were usually led by women and children" (*Tax* 249).

As the strikers served together on committees and led mass pickets, they thus created rhetorical space to rival the hegemony of market logic *and* shake off such "age-old tyrannies" as nativist and sexist chauvinism (Vorse, *Footnote* 15). In mass meetings and mass marches, Vorse observed, they were "the antithesis of mob" as they "came together to create and build" and learned through the strike to "get up on platforms and speak with fire and with the eloquence of sincerity," "write articles and leaflets," or "invent new forms of demonstration" (*Footnote* 12-13). Those new forms included the mass moving picket line that the workers devised to circumvent the ban on standing pickets. With as many as 20,000 strikers circling the mill district, the workers visually demonstrated their resolve while also deterring strikebreakers. As they marched, they sang, and the sight of singing strikers stood in sharp contrast to the lethal violence meted out by the police and militia and the anti-strike propaganda painting the strikers as lawless dynamiters. "The public as a whole realized that the strikers are peacefully inclined although determined in their manner," the *Lawrence Evening Tribune*, no friend of the strikers, had to admit (Foner 332).

From strike democracy also came the action that brought the struggle's turning point. Facing a mounting need to protect the strikers' children—a Syrian boy had just been killed, bayoneted in the back by a soldier—Italian workers recommended sending the children away to sympathetic families, as was often done in European strikes. The widely publicized spectacle of scores of emaciated children arriving in New York drew mass public sympathy; the scandal of Lawrence police clubbing children and tossing women into paddy wagons to try to stop the exodus drew mass censure. In the *New York Times* incendiary headlines of the strike's early weeks—"Fear Dynamite in Lawrence Strike," "Revolutionary Socialists Incited Workers"—gave way to "More Strike Waifs to be Sent Here" and "Heads Broken Over Order to Prevent Strikers Shipping Their Children Away."

Newspapers did not retreat from their anti-strike editorializing: the *Times* scolded the strikers as "selfish" because the "demand that something be done instantly for these poor children ... ignores how much has already been done for their class" ("Children and Society") while the *Boston Morning Journal* continued to represent the strikers as an "angry mob" waging vicious "battle" against the militia ("Cavalry

Repulses Rioters' Attack"). But photographs of small children marching beneath banners proclaiming "They Asked For Bread. They Received Bayonets" drew both public sympathy *and* investigation. Government inspectors, journalists, the wife of President William Howard Taft, and many scores of heretofore absent reformers and trade unionists poured into Lawrence. In Washington, Congress convened hearings. By mid-March the mills capitulated with an agreement that included progressive wage increases of up to twenty-five percent; as a strike wave spread across New England, manufacturers extended wage increases to some quarter million textile workers region-wide (Tax 263-4).

What workers gained, Vorse reported in *Harper's*, went well beyond money for bread:

Young girls have had executive positions. Men and women who have known nothing but work in the home and mill have developed a larger social consciousness. A strike like this makes people think. Almost every day for weeks people of every one of these nations have gone to their crowded meetings and listened to the speakers and have discussed these questions afterward, and in the morning the women have resumed their duty on the picket lines and the working together for what they believed was a common good. ("Trouble" 34-5)

Upon seeing the "six stores and seven soup kitchens" plus regular "mass demonstrations and mass amusements, huge picnics and concerts" that the workers had organized, Vorse gave up the assumption that the working class required the middle class's moral shepherding. "[A]ll laws made for the betterment of workers' lives," she argued, "have their origin with the workers. Hours are shortened, wages go up, conditions are better—*only* if the workers protest" (*Footnote* 14, emphasis added).

Bread and Roses on Trial

That Lawrence's social elites and textile barons did not share this enthusiasm is not surprising. Their vociferous condemnation, wrote Vorse, was "the inevitable reaction of the owning group protecting itself instinctively against any vital workers' movement" (Vorse, *Footnote* 18). But also troubled by and outright hostile to the strike were some of the Progressive era's most prominent reformers. Why would middle-class social workers, journalists, educators, and labor organizers waiver before or join mill owners and the press in denouncing a "vital workers' movement" that drew national attention and won some of the very reforms they had been advocating? The "trial" of Bread and Roses reveals how ruling ideas of civility can recruit even—or especially—those middle-class reformers working for social change to reinforce the very civil boundaries and social manners that allow injustice and inequality to perpetuate.

To read of Bread and Roses in *The Survey*, the journal of the Settlement movement, is to encounter an event almost entirely different from what Vorse described. Edward Devine set the tone for the April 1912 issue on "The Lawrence Strike from Various Angles" with an editorial explaining that while no one should

"seek to keep alive" the strike's "bitter controversies" and "tragic incidental blunders," *The Survey* "as a journal of constructive philanthropy" had an obligation to assess these recent events "in an atmosphere far removed from the angry tumult of the labor conflict" (1). With few exceptions—Women's Trade Union League founder Mary O'Sullivan praised the strike's revival of the spirit of the early trade union movement and declared the IWW "the best possible thing that could happen to the labor unions of America" (72-3); also reprinted was Vida Scudder's speech of support to the strikers that nearly cost her job at Wellesley and became an early test of the idea of academic freedom—the issue's contributors focused on censure (of the strikers), guilt (of the IWW and also of reformers for allowing workers to fall prey to a radical union), and absolution (of the military and police). For example:

- The strike, argued Walter Weyl, who would later found *The New Republic*, did not open up a promising direction for achieving the reformers' heretofore thwarted agenda of ending child labor, improving factory safety, and ensuring a more equitable distribution of wealth. Instead, it marked the middle class's failure to stand as guardians of the immigrant poor, leaving Lawrence's workers to trade "oceans of public sympathy" for "an ounce of working class revolt" (65).
- The xenophobic Robert Woods, head of Boston's South End House and secretary of the National Federation of Settlements, who had during the strike called Lawrence's workers "the very clod of humanity" ("The Clod Stirs" 1932), declared that the strike victory under the IWW banner "represents an amount of harm which only years of aggressive educational effort can overcome" ("The Breadth and Depth" 68).
- About the police beating of women and children at the Lawrence train station, Carl Christian Carstens, head of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, argued, "We must all agree that the removal of the children, even with the parents' consent, to a place where they might be brought up as thieves or prostitutes, would certainly be an offense" requiring the intervention of police who "are entitled to the credit of having acted with sincere good intentions" (71).

Their solutions varied—Weyl exhorting the middle class to greater vigilance; Harvard's James Ford favoring workers' cooperatives as an evolutionary road to prepare mentally unfit immigrants for democratic participation; Devine and Woods recommending restricted immigration; a mill overseer advocating the restoration of patient petition by workers and benevolent patronage from employers. Shared among these contributors, however, was the belief that Lawrence's problems required a remedy other than that devised by the workers themselves. At the core of their rejection of any worker-led remedy: the conviction that the mill workers' means, mass unity for a mass strike, were inherently violent.

The Survey's prominent characterization of the strikers and their union as violent is at first startling. After all, by now it had been widely acknowledged that Lawrence's workers—three dead, many hundreds wounded and beaten, at least one miscarriage resulting—had been victims, not perpetrators. By now the nation knew that it was a Lawrence school board member who, apparently at the behest of the American Woolen Company's president, had planted dynamite caches to

fuel headline hysteria (Flynn 129-30; Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All* 247). As for the pillorying of the IWW as “blood-stained Anarchists,” it was the IWW, O’Sullivan reminded *Survey* readers, that brought to the strike “the policy of non-resistance to the aggressions of the police and the militia” (73). Yet from Devine’s opening characterization of an “angry tumult” to sociologist John Graham Brooks’ closing warning that the IWW aimed for “the immediate inclusion of the tramp and gutter bird” in respectable unions (82), most contributors gravitated to the truthful appeal that strike violence had been promulgated by “imported leaders” (Devine 1) who led astray Lawrence’s “poor ignorant fellows” (“A Mill Overseer” 75) whose “[m]istakes of threats and violence” were “inevitable ... within a large population so alien and mentally impoverished” (Ford 70).

Influencing their responses were, of course, the Settlement movement’s currents of nativism and paternalism as well as the conservative drag of the AFL which had aggressively opposed the strike. Also evident is the pique of reformers at immigrant workers acting on their own authority, even marching in parades with signs insisting, “Give Us a Living Wage, Not Charity.” Perhaps too, we might hear these responses as the expressions of what Barbara and John Ehrenreich would later term the “professional-managerial class” that, joining together “salaried mental workers” such as social workers and teachers, seeks the “reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations” for its own interests distinct from both labor and capital (45).⁵ But in the wide agreement among reformers—present in *The Survey*’s discussion as well as in the progressive journal *The Outlook*—that the strike had been dismayingly violent and that responsibility lay with the workers for striking in the first place, I think we find something quite different from a group acting in its *own* class interests. We find the enlistment of the middle class in the corporate class’s project to undo the strike victory and reassert a strict separation between the narrow sphere for practicing formal democracy (from which most mill workers were, in any case, excluded) and the vast sphere of free-market liberty into which democracy was never to encroach.

The rallying of these reformers to defend this existing undemocratic order in the name of civil ideals becomes most evident in their explanations of what precisely made the workers’ actions violent. The workers and the IWW, wrote Devine, were not “frankly breaking out into lawless riot which we know well enough how to deal with”; instead, they relied on such “strange” forms of “violence” as “direct action” and “the general strike” which threatened “the fundamental idea of law and order” and the “sacredness of property” (1-2). The IWW’s method of “folding the hands,” warned Brooks, was intended to create a “riot of confusion” and revealed their “inveterate hostility toward society as it now exists” (82). Devine and Brooks weren’t wrong in surmising that the aspirations of Lawrence’s laboring majority went even beyond the crucial demands of higher pay and fewer hours. They were not wrong in suspecting that the workers had scant faith in the institutions of civil society—the mill-aligned press, the dismissive relief societies, the courts that arraigned strike leaders for deaths caused by police bullets. The strike had provided ample demonstrations that those institutions did not serve as impartial mediators providing open deliberative spaces but instead as custodians for ruling interests. The workers, who vowed in their statement accompanying the strike’s settlement to continue seeking an “ever-

increasing share of the value of the product of labor” and “increasing control of the machines that the workers operate” (Lawrence Textile Workers 79), were indeed arguing for “rule by the *demoi*” that liberal democracy’s foundational institutions and ideals—law and order, the sacredness of property—would hold in check. Whereas Vorse celebrated the new society workers were “coming together to build and create” (13), Devine, Brooks, and others defended the social order workers also sought to undo.

This isn’t to say that these reformers were not deeply disturbed by the dire conditions the Lawrence strike had brought to light. “If textile workers are earning less than a living wage,” Devine argued, “we should pay them more, not because they will follow strange doctrines and smash machinery if we do not, but because it is right and decent that they should have a living income” (2). Brought to light, too, were troubling questions about the very nature of U.S. democracy. “[W]hen we turn to the processes of industry, can we say that America is democratic?” was the question posed by an editorial in the leading progressive journal *The Outlook*:

... Is there not something wrong in our industrial system itself, when thousands upon thousands among those who make the clothes of the Nation and produce the food of the Nation and help to supply the other wealth of the Nation are ill clad and on the edge of starvation? There is justice in the law, “Work or starve,” but what justice is there in conditions that virtually say to thousands of workers, “Work and starve”? (“Violence and Democracy” 352-3)

Yet although *The Outlook* acknowledged that democracy should extend into the workplace—“substituting for industrial oligarchy a prevailing industrial democracy”—its editors argued that it could not happen through workers withholding their labor and thus refusing to subordinate their grievances for the good of civil peace: “It is right that the people through their representatives should use the bayonets of the militia and the clubs of the policemen to restore order whenever disorder arises” (353). Instead, economic justice would come, promised *Outlook* columnist Theodore Roosevelt, through management that is both “intelligent and sympathetic” and workers who “understand and sympathize with management” (353-4). With this assurance that civil speech and attitudes between enlightened employers and patient workers will bring, eventually, recognition and rights, Roosevelt sets aside the “work and starve” facts of the mill workers’ relationship to mill managers. The rhetorical ideals of moderation and mutuality are put to work to reprivatize, as a matter best dealt with between employer and employee, the strike’s public complaints.

Echoing this counsel is Jane Addams’ never-before-published response to the 1894 Pullman strike, “A Modern Lear,” which *The Survey* printed, with the added headnote contextualizing it as “a message for today” (Addams 131), near the end of 1912 just as silk workers in Paterson, New Jersey, had begun to stir. In casting the conflict between capital and labor as a family drama in which both father/owner and daughter/worker have forgotten their obligations to one another, Addams’ parable can be read as an understandable expression of a middle-class woman’s sidelined helplessness in a pitched battle between the railroad magnets and U.S. army on one

side and workers and their union on the other. Given how Bread and Roses had released women from the home as well as the mill, opening up new identities as organizers, speakers, writers, and leaders, “A Modern Lear” also needs to be placed within the campaign—one that served, it soon become clear, the ruling class’s agenda against *both* middle-class moderates and working-class radicals—to re-close the strike’s openings and re-privatize, as a “family matter,” its public arguments.

Indeed, by the time *The Survey*’s debate on Bread and Roses appeared, the mill owners’ “God and Country” campaign to redivide workers and break their new union was well underway. By the decade’s end, the Red Scare had decimated the IWW and had sought to shred the reputations of progressives like Jane Addams as well (McGerr 306-8). The claims of the AFL leadership to moderate respectability provided no cover; with the 1920s the corporate class unleashed an “open-shop” campaign on the AFL, reducing its membership by half. When Vorse looked back on Bread and Roses twenty-three years later—amid the great labor upsurge that would finally secure for the next half century much of the Progressive era’s reform agenda—she saw that “the injustices in the textile industry which made that strike ... are in broad outlines as true today as they were then ...” What she also saw: “an indignation whose fire has never gone out” (*Footnote* 19, 21).

What Democracy Looks Like

When Walter Weyl fretted that mill workers had forfeited “oceans of public sympathy” for an “ounce of working-class revolt,” he missed the Bread and Roses strike’s fundamental appeal: *Because* the workers acted, creating a space in which they could be viewed and recognized as more than extensions of their looms, public sympathy followed. For these workers, the IWW’s big-idea arguments—for instance, “Time for a four-hour day!”—were not “strange” as Devine had found them. Rather, the argument captured by such a slogan—that automation shouldn’t bring speed-ups and layoffs but instead full employment and less work hours for all—made practical, virtuous sense. Between the IWW’s founding in 1905 and the devastation of the Red Scare, more than a million workers participated in its radical strikes and actions (Dubofsky, “The IWW” 538).

In that period we have rich illustrations in a U.S. context of social class not as a *thing* but as a *relationship* and class consciousness not as something *given* but *made* (Thompson, *The Making* 9-11; Wood, Chapter 3 *passim*). The exploitation and antagonism workers experienced from New England mills and West Virginia mines to Midwest wheat fields and West Coast ports created in the first Gilded Age contexts for people within and across diverse workplaces to experience a new sense of relationship to one another and think in what E. P. Thompson terms “class ways” about the ruling ideas, including to varying degrees racism and nativism, that would divide them. The super-exploitative relations of production that marked the era did not automatically produce working-class solidarity and instigate mass action in all places in the same way and all at once. Instead, as Thompson emphasizes, *experience* figured as a “necessary middle term between social being [of exploitation and oppression] and social consciousness [of one’s means with others to intervene]” (Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* 98; see also Wood, Chapter 3 *passim*). The wealth

of political ideas and agitational experiences brought by immigrant workers from their home countries, the class-struggle and solidarity arguments delivered by IWW soapboxers and balladeers, the legacies of the late 19th century’s eight-hour day and Populist movements, and the Progressive era’s myriad political campaigns—for women’s and African American civil rights, against corporate monopolies, for consumer health and workplace safety—all created a rich experiential cultural environment in which U.S. workers, like those Thompson describes in his biography of England’s working class, could “feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their employers and rulers” (*The Making* 11).

For the journalists, labor organizers, women’s suffrage advocates, and social reformers who stood in the middle of Lawrence’s argument between the producers and appropriators of the region’s wealth, class was likewise not a fixed position on a sociological scale. The ideas of Bread and Roses coupled with their experiences and observations drew strike witnesses like Vorse, O’Sullivan, and Scudder, as well as Helen Keller and Elizabeth Glendower Evans to the side of workers while Weyl, Devine, and the Settlement movement’s most visible leaders lined up with employers. “If we stop history at any given point,” observes Thompson,

then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men [and women] over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, their institutions. (*The Making* 11)

The pattern that emerges in Bread and Roses is one that repeats through the 20th century’s social-justice flashpoints: the big-idea arguments and actions of exploited and oppressed groups testing society’s boundaries and drawing ruling-class reprisal while a middle class is pulled in one direction—Weyl warning that to revolt against the social order means forfeiting public sympathy—or another—Vorse discerning that through a strike’s upheaval “Harmony, not disorder, was being established ... a collective harmony” (*Footnote* 13).

This difficulty—this class politics—of discernment is one compositionists, especially those concerned with public rhetoric for social change, need to draw out and also reassess in the work of some of our field’s most celebrated thinkers. Like Weyl, for instance, Wayne Booth viewed radicalism and recognition, protest and sympathy as mutually exclusive. Consider the opening to his 1974 *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* where he expresses puzzlement over “the inability of *most* protest groups to get themselves heard” (xi, emphasis added). His case in point: a sixteen-day sit-in by University of Chicago students protesting the tenure denial of a popular professor. Here and throughout the book, Booth stresses his opposition to both the protest’s method and substance, which he sums up as a “frantic and self-defeating multiplication and discarding of the issues” as the students advanced such further demands as voting rights on university committees, university-provided daycare centers, doubled salaries for service workers, and a democratic voice for Hyde Park residents in university appointments (8). Although it is for good reason that his subsequent life’s work of seeking a “revitalized rhetoric” to rival the “warfare” of “lying, trickery, blackmail, and physical persuasion” (149-50) has had

such influence, we need to trouble his founding premises: that the “protest groups” of the 1960s and early 1970s did not “get themselves heard”; that calls for university democratization are unreasonable; that such forms of “physical persuasion” as the sit-in are tantamount to blackmail, even warfare. Just as Addams’ “A Modern Lear” needs to be read with critical attention to the conservative impetus for its first publication, we should place Booth’s appeals for a rhetoric of assent in its historical context: a harassed dean defending a university’s limited participatory sphere against a burgeoning rule-by-the-*demos* argument. By doing so, we can bring into view, and into our teaching, the wider field of rhetorical practice and the history of the rhetorical means that have won social change. Through that history we and our students can consider, against the seemingly common-sensical claim that audience unruliness always closes communicative channels, those instances where it has taken unruliness to create the conditions—“a rhetorical field,” Booth writes, “... what [John] Dewey called ‘a public’” (149-50)—within which communication and respect can actually flourish.

At stake in taking up such questions and engaging our students in a fuller appreciation of the rhetorical assets required—and the rhetorical controversies that ensue—in arguments for social change is the future of the very idea of a public good. The imperilment of the public good is what Raymond Shadis recognized when he called out the NRC for “infuriating” audiences by promoting nuclear-industry propaganda. In a revealing footnote near the end of *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Booth also anticipated the threat of the advancing neoliberal agenda to any rhetoric of mutual recognition and common ground. Despairing of the utter lack of comity at the core of capitalist democracy, he writes:

It is ... not just the advertising and political propaganda spawned by capitalism that must go: the whole ‘liberal’ assumption that men are not accountable to their fellows for how they acquire and spend their private fortunes is untenable ... [I]t seems clearer and clearer that if we do not find some way to move beyond our inhumane economic system, we will lose what is left of our humane political traditions ... as our present economic system induces viciousness, deception, and privatization to the point of psychosis. “Weak” forces like tradition, the church, the university, or natural altruism, if any, cannot combat this systematic destructiveness indefinitely. (201-2 n.32)

Those words not only point ahead to today’s neoliberalized democracy, where state governors push legislation to privatize public resources for the profit of corporate donors and where regulatory agencies are staffed by former executives from the industries for which they are to serve as watchdogs. Booth’s words also point back to the same problem of capitalist plutocracy that the IWW captured in an editorial cartoon for its journal *Solidarity* depicting a textile magnate standing on a map of the United States, wiping his feet on child labor laws and first-amendment protections while in the corner a cowering Uncle Sam bites his nails (Young).

Between then and now we have not only the past forty years of increasingly unrestrained economic destructiveness but also the previous sixty years of

agitation for and the realization of indisputable, however incomplete and fragile, democratizing gains. Before we lose what is left of “our humane political traditions,” we should consider and teach that what is humane and what is democratic in those traditions is owed to people, from the workers of Lawrence to the residents near Indian Point, who have been informed, passionate, *and*, when confronting an entrenched and unjust social order, frequently disorderly.

Endnotes

1. This essay began with invited talks for the Federation Rhetoric Symposium/Writing Democracy Conference at Texas A&M Commerce and the composition programs at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte and Syracuse University. I’m grateful for those opportunities to develop and discuss these ideas as well as to Shannon Carter and Deborah Mutnick for their insightful reading of an earlier draft of this article. My thinking in this essay is further influenced by the scholarship of Dana Cloud, Susan Herbst, Seth Kahn and JongHwa Lee, Paula Mathieu and Diana George, and Rolf Norgaard who likewise recommend historical, contextual, and political rather than normative approaches to the question of uncivil speech.

2. This argument about neoliberalism’s dependence on civility might seem counterintuitive since most often it is associated, from Reagan’s mass firing of striking air traffic controllers to the post-Katrina privatization of New Orleans’ public schools, with shock-doctrine tactics and disaster opportunism. But day to day corporate privatization has also depended on a fuzzy language of consensus and compromise in service to privatizing goals (Lecerle 219-20; Welch). *Reforming Social Security*, for instance, appears as a *reasonable compromise* against the foil of Tea Party extremism. Dressed in appeals to fairness and sharing, neoliberalism’s woolly rhetoric, argues Marxist linguist Jean-Jacques Lecerle, aims to avoid debate and deflect scrutiny away from policies that deepen inequality and threaten the environment (213-21).

3. At an LGBT fundraiser for the 2012 Obama campaign, a few audience members heckled the president with shouts of “Marriage!” That they also paid up to \$35,800 a plate to be able to do so (Werner and Pace) illustrates the neoliberalization of protest itself—the ability to speak one’s truth to power coming at a hefty price—to which the Madison capitol takeover and Occupy park encampments provide a welcome counterpoint. Welcome too is the president’s recent, and long overdue, acknowledgment that same-sex couples should be able to marry. But by qualifying his statement as personal and emphasizing that the issue remains one for states, including North Carolina with its recently passed LGBT marriage ban, to decide, Obama gives us a further example of neoliberalism’s woolly rhetoric: the packaging of states’ rights as more democratic and just than a Constitutional right to equal protection under the law.

4. For Shils’ elite conception of the “civil citizen,” see also Shils “The Virtue of Civility,” 304; for a survey of anti-democratic sentiment in Plato and Aristotle see Wood Chapter 6, *passim*.

5. See Erik Olin Wright’s “Intellectuals and the Class Structure of Capitalist Society” for an incisive critique of the Ehrenreichs’ conception of a professional-

managerial class that, with 20th-century middle-class professionalism, emerges as a social force that could rival both the working and capitalist classes.

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Nancy Welch is Professor of English at the University of Vermont where she teaches courses in composition, rhetoric, women’s studies, and fiction writing. Her articles have appeared in *College English*, *JAC*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *Pedagogy*, and her short stories have appeared in such journals as *Prairie Schooner* and *Threepenny Review* as well as in her collection *The Road from Prosperity* (Southern Methodist University Press). She is a recipient of College English’s Richard Ohmann award for “We’re Here and We’re Not Going Anywhere: Why Working-Class Rhetorical Traditions Still Matter,” and her most recent book, *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World*, was published by Boynton/Cook.