

“Characteristics of Demagoguery, Revised,” Patricia Roberts-Miller¹



A basic principle of democracy is that the general public can make appropriate decisions on matters of common interest. This ability is dependent upon the public's access to information. The more distorted that information, the less likely the public will make appropriate decisions. Distorted information is generally called "propaganda," and, while harmful to public discourse, it isn't fatal. That is because, as long as the discourse is free and open, propaganda is likely to be countered--if you tell a lie, I can point out that it was a lie, as long as I have the ability to speak. If, however, my ability to criticize you is restricted, then your lies will stand.

The easiest way to restrict the ability of people to criticize you is to make it dangerous to do so. This can be done through passing laws--so that people can be thrown in jail, fined, or sued for saying certain things. But it can also be done through so rousing your followers that they will try to harm anyone who disagrees with you. That is what demagoguery does.

People often use "demagoguery" simply to mean effective discourse that they don't like, or they assume that demagoguery is rhetoric used on behalf of a bad cause. (Thus, sometimes people will defend someone against the charge of demagoguery by saying, "It isn't demagoguery because he's right.") But just about any political viewpoint can be put forward in a demagogic way--it isn't restricted to one position on the political spectrum.

Demagoguery is polarizing propaganda that motivates members of an ingroup to hate and scapegoat some outgroup(s), largely by promising certainty, stability, and what Erich Fromm famously called “an escape from freedom.” It significantly undermines the quality of public argument for reasons and in ways discussed below. In the most abstract, the reason it is so harmful is that it creates and fosters a situation in which it is actively dangerous to criticize dominant views, cultures, and political groups. It makes discourse a kind of coercion, largely through rousing and appealing to hate. Thus, the very people who make the decisions cannot hear all the information they need. Historically, demagoguery is a precursor to the ending of democracy--that is, when demagogues succeed, their first move is almost always to restrict the power of the people or parliaments in favor of some kind of tyrannical or totalitarian system.

Some people don't distinguish demagoguery from propaganda (which is generally defined as dishonest and fallacious discourse intended to further the power or agenda of the propagator), but I would say that it is a subset of propaganda: demagoguery is polarizing propaganda that functions to motivate people by rousing and justifying hatred of an outgroup. In other words, all demagoguery is propaganda,

¹ This is adapted from several handouts on demagoguery by Professor Roberts Miller (much of it from <http://www.drw.utexas.edu/roberts-miller/handouts/demagoguery>). Some light editing has been done, and a few additions made (indicated in square brackets).

but not all propaganda is demagoguery. In addition to propaganda, there are other kinds of discourse that are unproductive or harmful (e.g., bargaining), but they are distinguished from demagoguery in that they don't promote hate and violence.

Demagoguery is a way of arguing, so that the same political agenda can be argued for in ways that are demagogic or not (e.g., the distinction between Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham, or Huey Long and FDR), and one can have demagoguery on multiple sides of the political debate (e.g., the Nazis and communists in pre-war Germany). One can even have the same person, arguing for the same political agenda, sometimes use demagoguery and sometimes not (e.g., Father Coughlin's early speeches are only mildly demagogic, but his later speeches are very much so....

The following is a list of the qualities that, as far as I am concerned, typify demagoguery. That isn't to say that every demagogue uses rhetoric that always has every one of them, nor that every one is equally important, but that, if one thinks of demagoguery as a disease, these are the symptoms, and a person might have a mild or severe case of demagoguery. The two qualities it seems to me that a text must have in order to qualify as demagoguery are polarization and hatefulness.

Polarization. This is one of the two most important qualities of demagoguery. To polarize is to divide a diverse range of things into two poles. Thus, a demagogue breaks everything into two camps: the one s/he represents (what people call the in-group), and evil (the out-group). This kind of polarization recurs throughout demagoguery--there are only two options, there are only two policies, there are only two groups.

If you are not on their side--with all your heart and soul, in all ways and without hesitation--then you are against them. The tendency to put things in these terms greatly simplifies complicated issues (which is almost certainly its main attraction) and implicitly justifies brutal tactics against large groups of people (another attraction for demagogues). It also (almost certainly intentionally) shuts down deliberation, as really good decision-making necessitates considering all the options, and there is almost never a situation in which there are really only two options...I think it's difficult to tell whether demagogues simplify a complicated situation as a purely rhetorical strategy, or because that's how they really see things. I think it's always very difficult to figure out what a demagogue "really" thinks. Certainly, polarizing is a useful rhetorical strategy for demagogues, especially if they can work their audience into a state of panic.

Oversimplification/Reduction and Simple Solutions

Partly as a result of polarization, demagogues rarely argue that a situation is complex, multi-determined, difficult to grasp. They may argue that implementation of the solution is hard, but the concept of the solution is typically simple.

Ingroup/outgroup thinking, a rhetoric of hate. Another constant in demagoguery is that the demagogue tries to promote and justify hatred of the "out-group." That is, demagogues identify some group as "in"--people like them--and some other groups as "out"--often, but not necessarily, a racial minority. Sometimes it's members of a particular political persuasion (communists, liberals, feminists), sometimes a religious group (Catholics, Quakers, Muslims, secular humanists), often people of a certain nation or cultural tradition (Americans, Jews, "the west"). Thus, it's very common for the exact nature of the "out" group to be vague--Osama bin Laden at moments seems to be railing against the United States as a nation, at other moments as a cultural tradition, sometimes as a religion...

The demagogue assumes or argues for hating members of that group, as well as anyone who defends that group (or who even criticizes hating them). Sometimes demagogues are quite open that they are advocating hate (e.g., Hitler and the Jews) and sometimes slightly more subtle (e.g., Bilbo and African-Americans). In the latter version, you get the "I'm not a racist but..." argument--in his book (as opposed, apparently, to his speeches) Bilbo claims he doesn't hate African-Americans, but he just thinks they're inferior in all sorts of ways and have to be transported back to Africa, and so on and so forth. If that isn't hate, I don't know what is.

Slipperiness on crucial terms; god and devil terms. Demagogues rely heavily on certain terms that are conventionally accepted and not very clearly defined. Because they're used so often, and so rhetorically powerful, these terms can seem clear to an audience as long as the audience doesn't stop to think exactly what the rhetor mean. And demagogues certainly won't define them--the vagueness of the terms is very helpful for their purposes.

Words often have a connotation and a denotation. That is, the words "mutt," "mongrel," and "mixed breed" all denote the same thing (they all mean a dog that is not purebred) but some have a negative tone (mutt, mongrel) and some more neutral (mixed breed), so they have different connotations. One way to describe the kinds of terms that demagogues like is that they are heavy on connotation but light on denotation (everyone knows how they feel about those concepts, but are not actually very clear on just what they denote). The strange thing is that you can think the term is perfectly clear until you actually start to define it, and then you can discover that it's extremely vague (try to define "race" for instance--a term that people constantly use).

Kenneth Burke talks about this as god and devil terms. That is, some terms are just Good (e.g., freedom, patriotism, community, peace, democracy) in that anything associated with them must be Good, so those are god terms. And some terms are just Bad (e.g., terrorist, racism, liberal, fascist, communist) in that anything associated with them must be Bad, so those are devil terms. These things change over time (in the antebellum era, "abolitionist" was a devil term, and now it's pretty much a god term) and from one community to another (environmentalist in a devil term for Rush Limbaugh's fans but a god term for members of Earth First!; "bourgeoisie" is a devil term for Marxist-Leninists, but a neutral term for most people).

These terms are so powerful (and there is often a red herring move--see the information on fallacies) that people will try to associate god terms with their cause and devil terms with the out-group even when it makes almost no sense. So, for instance, the Japanese Declaration of War for WWII describes what they're doing by bombing Pearl Harbor as "peace;" exterminating populations is often called "pacifying" peoples (see, for instance, Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare: The CIA's tactical manual for paramilitary forces in Central America.)

This slipperiness is useful for demagogues for several reasons. In the first place, such words evoke strong emotions, and that's always helpful. It's also helpful in that, if one can get a "god term" associated with one's side, people will often feel that there would be something mildly sinful about questioning the argument. Third, broad definitions, like broad brushes, can cover a lot quickly--if one tosses out that one's opponent is a liberal, for instance, then s/he has to take time to defend against that charge (see the fallacies handout on ad personum/ad hominem). Fourth, a demagogue doesn't want to define the term carefully because, if it's defined broadly (which is the most useful for being able to tar other people), then one's audience will notice and might object (so, for instance, no American politician wants to define "terrorist," as it would become difficult to explain why Henry Kissinger and Oliver North are

not in jail), but a narrow definition would make it harder to apply to all of one's opponents.

Demonizing, dehumanizing, and/or scapegoating the out-group, especially on racial, ethnic, or religious bases. Demonizing is done through explicitly saying that the out-group is Satan himself or a tool of his (e.g., Falwell on homosexuals, Osama bin Laden on the US), or through using metaphors that imply Satan and devils (e.g., Calhoun referring to abolition as a "fiendish" plot).

This move has several functions. In addition to justifying extreme measures (as one should give no quarter to the devil), it is a scare tactic that helps polarize the situation. If one can persuade one's audience that the out-group is Satanic, then even listening to that group is exposing one's self to the wiles of the Evil One. And, anyone who argues for fair treatment of that out-group (or even allowing their point of view to be heard) can themselves be demonized (as when Falwell says that the promotion of tolerance toward homosexuality may be Satan preparing the way for the Antichrist); this is part of the general project of demagoguery of making it actively dangerous to disagree.

On an individual level, people are especially likely to scapegoat when they feel partially responsible--it is "denial through projection" (Landes, in *Encyclopedia of Social History*, 659). That is, if I drop a dish, and feel bad about it, I'm very likely to try to blame it on someone else. When entire communities engage in scapegoating, it isn't clear if it's because, like the individual, they secretly feel responsible, or because they do not understand the true causes of the problem, or they don't want to blame whoever is at fault. Chip Berlet and Mathew Lyons take the last view, and emphasize the emotional benefits of scapegoating:

The scapegoat bears the blame, while the scapegoaters feel a sense of righteousness and increased unity. The social problems may be real or imaginary, the grievances legitimate or illegitimate, and members of the targeted group may be wholly innocent or partly culpable. What matters is that the scapegoats are wrongfully stereotyped as all sharing the same negative trait, or are singled out for blame while other major culprits are left off the hook. (8)

Like demonizing, dehumanizing (denying the basic humanity of some group) is done explicitly (as when Nazi scientists tried to claim that Africans were partway between apes and humans and thus not fully human) and implicitly (through metaphors and similes). This is one place where literature, film, television, and posters are especially important, as they can help to promote certain images of various groups as less than human (e.g., *Birth of a Nation*). Dehumanizing is absolutely necessary for policies like genocide, and was very important in the Nazi attempt to "cleanse" Europe of Jews, eastern Europeans, homosexuals, Romas, Jehovah's Witnesses, and so on...

Scapegoating is closely connected, but just slightly different. A "scapegoat" is a person or group on whom one dumps all responsibility for a situation; that person or group is responsible for the bad situation of the in-group. Thus, McCarthy insisted that the various setbacks to American world policy were the result of communist plots (as opposed to being the consequences of bad policies, a complicated situation, etc.); Calhoun attributed slave uprisings to abolitionists (as opposed to slaves escaping and fighting because they didn't like being slaves); Hitler blamed a Jewish conspiracy for Germany's losing World War I (as opposed to it being a bad war to have gotten into... If the bad situation is the result of a certain evil group, then ridding the world of that group would solve the problem. Sometimes that conclusion is explicitly drawn (eg., Hitler, McCarthy, Bilbo, Calhoun), but sometimes it's left implicit.

Scapegoating is often racial (as with Hitler and Jews) but not necessarily; McCarthy scapegoats communists, and proslavery politicians of the antebellum era scapegoated abolitionists; Limbaugh scapegoats liberals; leftist rhetoric used to scapegoat "the military-industrial complex" or the tri-lateral commission; Falwell scapegoated a whole list of political groups for the 9/11/01 tragedy.

Victimization. One thing that surprises people about demagoguery, or that they don't expect to see, is that it relies heavily on a rhetoric of victimization. The ingroup is being victimized by the situation (often by being treated the same as the outgroup, so there is a kind of political narcissism operating), and the claim is that the ingroup has responded to this victimization with extraordinary patience and kindness. (If the actual history is disenfranchisement and violence, then that behavior is reframed as patience and kindness because it could have been worse.) Now, however, to react with anything other than punitive violence (to try to think about the situation, or deliberate on it, or include the outgroup in any deliberations) is weak, vacillating, cowardly, and feminine.

As a consequence, demagoguery has to square the circle of inspiring fear while not looking fearful (since fearfulness is being paired with thinking and deliberating)—there are often claims of extraordinary courage in the face of a terrible situation, or a representation of one's self as calm and reasonable while making apocalyptic predictions, and the odd insistence of the sheer rationality of hyperbolic claims (I will admit, this is one aspect of demagoguery that often makes me laugh).

Motivism. Motivism is the assertion that people don't really have reasons for what they do, but they are motivated by something else – some dark motive (evil, lust, hatred, etc.) Rarely do demagogues assert that everyone has base motives (including themselves); more often they assert that the out-group has base motives, while they are motivated by something admirable or at least complicated.

Martin Reisgel and Ruth Wodak, in their book *Discourse and Discrimination*, say:

The image of the...ingroup is more differentiated than the images of the others' groups, which, all in all, are much more characterized by 'internal attributions' than the ingroup. The outgroups' actions and behaviour are seldom explained by reference to external factors of communicative situation and historical, social, political and economic context, but primarily by pointing to alleged inherent and essential traits. (11)

[...] Research suggests that this is a quality that almost everyone naturally has to some degree (for instance, drivers who do something rude or unsafe explain that incident as an exception to their otherwise good driving method but other driver's rudeness or bad driving moves as a sign that the other person is a jerk or stupid). Most people, however, are embarrassed when they realize that they have done this; demagogues refuse to acknowledge that they've done it. (Which is, once again, one of the reasons that people who do psychological analysis talk about demagogues as people with personality disorders - this is one of the traits that signals sociopathy and narcissism.)

[According to rhetorical critic Wayne Booth, "motivism," is a "modern dogma," a reductive form of reasoning which relieves you of having to attend to your opponent's argument, and allows you to focus only on the motives for his argument, since he is in the grips of ideology].

Entitlement, double-standard, rejection of the notion of reciprocally binding rules or principles. This is closely connected to the above, and it is one of the qualities of demagogues I find personally fascinating. The best way to explain it is that *they live in a world of double standards--something that is wrong for*

the out-group is okay for them and the in-group, and something that is okay for them and the in-group is wrong for the out-group.

Thus, for instance, the same people who criticized Clinton's intervention in Somalia and Chechnya then claimed that criticizing Bush's intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq was "unpatriotic" and "not supporting the troops." The same people who said that Thomas' sexually harassing Anita Hill was a sign of unfitness said that Clinton's harassing women didn't matter. It is very rarely acknowledged for the reason discussed above - the bad behavior on the part of them or the in-group is an exception or justified by the particular situation or is simply denied, while the bad behavior on the part of the out-group is taken as True and Real and Eternal.

The few times it is acknowledged, it is rationalized through some claim of entitlement on the part of the demagogue and the in-group. Thus, Hitler asserted that Germans needed room to expand, but was not willing to grant the same right to any of the peoples he considered slavish; Germans were, he insisted, entitled to better treatment than any other ethnicity simply due to being German.

Apocalyptic, eschatological metanarrative (Holy War, jihad). This one is hard to explain, but mainly because it's hard to find straightforward terms--it's actually fairly easy to grasp once you get past the language. A "metanarrative" is simply a kind of story that a culture likes to tell (boy meets girl, person rises from poverty to wealth and fame). It is a way that we understand the things that happen around us. (And sometimes we force reality into one of those metanarratives even when they don't fit--Lincoln was not really born in a log cabin; George Washington didn't chop down a cherry tree.)

Apocalyptic refers to the notion of the apocalypse, or the end of the world; eschatological means something related to the idea of the history of good and evil. So, an apocalyptic or eschatological metanarrative is a way of telling stories that puts events in the context of the eternal battle between Good and Evil. (Thus, some people use the term "Holy War" or "jihad" for this point of view.)

A demagogue presents her/his cause as the cause of Good, as one stage in the eternal battle between Good and Evil. They often use religious language, comparing themselves explicitly or implicitly to religious figures (Jesus, John the Baptist, or Mohammed), or describing the conflict as apocalyptic (meaning the battle at the end of the world)...

Denial of responsibility for situation (except lack of vigilance). This quality is connected to the assertion of simple solutions. When a demagogue is talking to his audience about the disastrous situation in which we stand, s/he does not describe them or their policies as responsible for that situation, except insofar as we have not been vigilant enough. Hitler didn't tell his audience that Germany's having started WWI contributed to their situation; on the contrary, he insisted they were innocent victims. (Falwell's comments after the 9/11/01 are another interesting example of this.)

This strategy is, of course, connected to scapegoating. We are not responsible; they are. The solution is not to change what we are doing, but to get rid of them.

This strategy may be one reason that people are really drawn to demagogues. It is not very pleasant to have to face up to having made a mistake, or to having had bad judgment. Under those circumstances, it is difficult to face up (and own up) to one's error. Some people find the possibility of having to change their minds (especially on major issues) absolutely terrifying, and will grasp at the denial of responsibility like a drowning person at a log. That's what demagogues offer people--a way not to have to admit

error.

Heavy reliance on fallacious arguments, especially false dilemma, scare tactics, red herring, and ad personum. (see [webpage on fallacies](#))

Pandering to popular prejudice and stereotype, often racist. Demagogues typically appeal to popular images (often visual). This appeal reinforces those images, even when they have nothing to do with reality--whether of certain ethnicities, nationalities, political views, or life situations (discourse about welfare always invoked an image of "the welfare mother"--a stereotype that did not represent the majority of people who got that sort of assistance).

Hitler appealed to various popular stereotypes about Jews, many of which were patently contradictory (e.g., that all Jews are rich, that all Jews are communists). But, one of many weird things about stereotypes, especially racial ones, is that they are impervious to counter-evidence--the presence of poor Jews did nothing to slow down his ability to assert a Jewish conspiracy behind Germany's economic problems, just as the presence of educated African-Americans did nothing to complicate proslavery politicians' assertions that slaves could not possibly take care of themselves if freed.

This is one sign of the kind of person especially vulnerable to demagoguery--their mental images are more real to them than reality, and they are actively frightened at the prospect of admitting error or changing their minds. Sometimes they make a virtue of never having changed their minds or refusing to look at evidence that might contradict their prejudices. When they are confronted with counter-examples, they dismiss them as exceptions (and it's interesting that the number of "exceptions" doesn't matter.)

These images tend to come from film, literature, and popular media, and not reality, yet they have profound impact on how people behave. Thus, the image of the rapacious African-American man who was lusting after white women was directly related to the white crowd's willingness to lynch African-American men who hadn't done anything in particular; as Marrus says about Hitler's antisemitic rhetoric, "Virtually every commentator concludes that, despite his efforts to portray himself as an independent thinker and creative genius, Hitler expressed nothing that was not part of the popular culture of Vienna or Munich in the period of his youth" (11). Hitler did not invent the images of the evil Jew, the criminal Gypsy, or the inferior slav, but simply used them.

These images are often racist, and racist images are, as Reisigl and Wodak say, "negative, emotionally very loaded, and rigid" (1) (even though they are often contradictory, 10). That is, racists make a set of assumptions--that there is this thing called "race" (a surprisingly hollow notion, given its power), that each "race" is associated with essential attributes, that races exist in a hierarchy (with their race at the top), and that this hierarchy was--until recently--absolutely stable. If they are challenged on any of these assumptions, they get furious and refuse to listen.

These images are often dismissed or criticized by the elite, but have a strong hold in the popular imagination (e.g., the accusation that Jews murder Christian boys for their passover celebrations); when demagogues appeal to them, they claim to be speaking an "unpopular truth" (a phrase that comes up over and over again among followers of demagogues). On the contrary, their platitudes are very popular, and not true ...

Anti-intellectualism. For many scholars, this is an extremely important part of demagoguery, but I think it's fairly minor. (In fact, I think there are various demagogues who are very intellectual, such as John Calhoun.) Another factor that makes people think demagogues aren't the sharpest pencil in the drawer (albeit often very cunning) is that demagogues often evince a deep loathing for intellectuals. It is not necessarily jealousy (although I'm not ruling that out), but may simply be the realization that they are threatened by anyone capable of doing critical analysis.

It's important to remember that the last thing a demagogue wants is fair and open discussion of issues--the main goal of demagoguery is to keep opposition points of view from getting a fair hearing. (Although they often claim to be in favor of such a discussion, in fact, they do everything they can to prevent it.) Because demagoguery is based in over-simplifying the situation, polarizing the community, and promoting hatred of out-groups, people who advocate careful consideration of the evidence and who can notice and draw attention to the demagogue's fallacies are actively dangerous for the demagogue's project.

That is not to say that intellectuals are never demagogues, nor that they are never taken in by demagoguery (e.g., Heidegger and Pound were suckered by Nazism). Nor is it to say that demagogues are opposed to citing scientists and professors when it suits their purposes (e.g., Hitler or Bilbo's use of eugenicists).

Nationalism. Last but not least, demagogues promote nationalism. Nationalism is best understood in contrast to patriotism. Whereas patriotism is simply love for one's country and institutions, nationalism is the sense that one's nation is the best, often because it is more sacred than other countries. (Because you can't have two "best" countries, the achievements of other countries and cultures have to be denigrated.) Nationalism is love for one's country plus contempt for other countries mixed with *worshipping* the symbols of one's nation.

Patriotism is often the result of pride in specific achievements, so it is perfectly compatible with vigorous criticism (that is, there is nothing unpatriotic about criticizing one's country), but nationalism is grounded in total loyalty to some perceived (or projected?) essence of the national identity, and therefore cannot tolerate criticism.

Nationalism is not just attachment to one's nation-state, but to some mythic essence of that identity, so that some ingroup represents the nation and other citizens do not. (In other words, membership in the nation-state is determined legally--you're a member if you're a citizen, but for the mythic dream-state of nationalism, one must be a member of some ingroup, generally a particular ethnicity.) Whereas patriotism strives for fairly practical things (e.g., effective policies, social security, a healthy economy, a just government), nationalism strives, first and foremost, for homogeneity.

Because the "nation" of nationalism is mythopoetic (rather than constructed through constitutions, rights, actions), nationalism demands devotion to symbols of that mythos, rather than attention to the legal and historical constructions. Thus, demagogues always legally enforce deference to the mythic symbols, which they take as a sign of complete obedience to the mythic nation, while ignoring (if not denigrating) attention to the legal and historical constructs, such as the constitution, laws, civil rights, and so on. Demagogues, and people prone to demagoguery, get very upset about people mistreating or inadequately deferring to the mythic symbols, but don't much care about people subverting the constitution or breaking laws.

Keep in mind that not every demagogue exemplifies every one of these characteristics, and certainly not in every speech. In addition, remember that exhibiting a few of these characteristics does not make a speaker a demagogue.