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To cite this article: Joshua Reeves (2022) Rhetoric, violence, and the subject of civility, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 19:1, 91-108, DOI: [10.1080/14791420.2022.2030062](https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2022.2030062)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2022.2030062>



Published online: 17 Feb 2022.



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## Rhetoric, violence, and the subject of civility

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### ABSTRACT

While critical scholars often focus on the ontological boundaries of rhetoric and violence, this article analyzes the rhetoric/violence relationship from the perspective of cultural governance. It builds upon earlier work in rhetoric and civility to analyze how authorities and institutions cultivate deliberative rhetorical norms as a means of regulating citizens' political conduct. The rhetoric/violence opposition is used as a police logic to suppress radical political action. This police logic is used to suppress physical violence and to expand violence's conceptual domain. As a result, certain subjects are marked as violent and are, therefore, singled out for suppression and criminalization.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 May 2020

Accepted 13 December 2020

### KEYWORDS

Rhetoric; violence; civility;  
liberalism; governmentality

When strolling through the halls of an elementary school today, one is likely to be greeted by what teachers and scholars call the “hidden curriculum”<sup>1</sup> of the twenty-first century. While math, science, and reading are taught from traditional textbooks, evidence of the hidden curriculum can be found plastered on classroom walls. A common elementary school poster, showing two kids struggling over a toy, admonishes its viewers: “I use words when I am angry” (Figure 1). This poster reinforces an essential element of the hidden curriculum: that rhetorical action is a crucial mechanism for managing physical conflict and suppressing violence. Along with a host of complementary policies, programs, and technologies of cultural outreach, this poster instructs students in one of the fundamental tenets of the American civic compact: that we must prepare ourselves to be what Miller calls “subjects of civility,”<sup>2</sup> subjects whose political participation revolves around speaking, debating, negotiating, appealing, and the other rhetorical rituals of liberal democracy. In a pithy description of the political vision that defines this subject of civility, McCloskey argues: “A free society is a rhetorical society. A free society is a speaking, rather than violent, society.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, rhetoric's relationship to violence is hardly a new topic of conversation. In recent years this problem has received an increasing share of disciplinary attention.<sup>4</sup> However, most scholars foreground the ontological dimensions of this problem and thus explore the definitional boundaries between rhetoric and violence. These inquiries are typically driven by important questions like, “What is rhetoric? What is violence? And at what point can/does one drift into the other?” Yet another problem, one made especially urgent by the protests and struggles that frame our current political moment,



**Figure 1.** Poster aimed at preschool and elementary school audiences.

focuses on the cultural significance of the rhetoric/violence opposition. Thus, instead of focusing primarily on the ontological status of rhetoric vis-à-vis violence, or on the etiological relationship between the two (i.e. whether certain kinds of rhetoric instigate violence),<sup>5</sup> this essay focuses on rhetoric's status as what Ian Hunter calls a "cultural technology"<sup>6</sup> – a collection of cultural strategies, practices, and texts that cultivate citizens' moral formation and govern their conduct in accord with nonviolent liberal political norms. Various cultural and political authorities instruct U.S. residents in the assorted rituals and beliefs of liberal citizenship, governing their political subjectivities in accord with liberalism's emphasis on civility and nonviolent social change. As Bennett describes, this Foucaultian perspective on "governmentality" approaches culture as

a set of institutionally embedded relations of government in which the forms of thought and conduct of extended populations are targeted for transformation – in part via the extension through the social body of the forms, techniques, and regiments of aesthetic and intellectual culture.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, the instruction and celebration of speech, debate, deliberation, negotiation, nonviolent protest, and related expressions of rhetorical culture gradually mold the conduct and beliefs of the population, habituating them to a limited domain of political participation. As the opening reflection on elementary schools illustrates, from a very young age we are taught by diverse institutions and authorities to be *rhetorical* subjects, to be subjects of civility who resolve our differences with communication. Building upon Greene's work on the rhetorical subject,<sup>8</sup> this essay explores how our lifelong training in rhetorical civility also serves as a constant reminder of what constitutes unacceptable political conduct – those activities that can be articulated in terms of what Crosswhite calls rhetoric's "great other": violence.<sup>9</sup>

By analyzing how this cultural governance takes place, the present article argues that the rhetoric/violence opposition – which is deeply embedded in U.S. law as well as in its cultural values<sup>10</sup> – is used as a police logic to determine and regulate the boundaries of permissible political conduct. In other words, we are cultivated in a specific vision of rhetorical culture that helps prevent us from developing radical political subjectivities that threaten liberal democracy. If radical rhetorics break the traditional bounds of civility, they tend to be categorized as “violent,” thus leading to their suppression. This struggle over the constitution of violence has only intensified since Trump’s political ascent – for example, during the heated struggle to conceptualize the rally/riot/insurrection that took place at the U.S. capitol on January 6, 2021. Yet this process is perhaps best illustrated by the 2020–2021 racial justice protests, which political opponents have consistently denounced as “riotous,” “destructive,” and – especially – “violent.”<sup>11</sup> Many politicians, media personalities, nonprofits, and other authorities are striving, with uneven success, to reestablish a liberal politics of civility by denouncing, marginalizing, and arresting the protests’ more militant activists.<sup>12</sup> These authorities’ casuistic stretching of “violence” brings the political and theoretical significance of this problem into fuller relief: this process is not only about cultivating political civility and nonviolent rhetorical citizenship; it is, just as much, about marking certain subjects and certain kinds of political behavior as violent, thus renegotiating the conceptual domain of violence. Violence – a concept traditionally reserved to the consistent (if theoretically underdeveloped) U.S. legal standard of “the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force”<sup>13</sup> – is increasingly recast to include various forms of “violent” or “weaponized” communication. This reconstitution of violence, I argue, has urgent political implications because it determines which subjects and which political activities can be targeted for scrutiny and elimination.

Ultimately: as these reconstitutions of violence take place, our cultural training in rhetorical civility habituates us to an increasingly narrow and unobtrusive political existence. To analyze this problem, I begin by examining the ontological approach to the rhetoric/violence relationship before describing a complementary approach centered on cultural governance. Next, I investigate how rhetorical culture – in the formal sense of training in effective discourse, as well as in the more general sense of how political authorities and cultural texts instruct us to live in accord with liberal rhetorical values (as illustrated by the above poster) – plays an important role in preparing us to adopt civil, nonviolent methods of political participation. I then analyze how authorities in the Trump and post-Trump eras have attempted to reconstitute violence to include activism that rejects the politics of civility. Finally, I contend that attempts to reassert these norms of rhetorical civility are central to an ongoing war on dissent that, ultimately, reinstantiates a conservative vision of the politically possible. The political stakes of this problem are especially high, I conclude, during this time of tremendous injustice and tremendous potential.

### **Rhetoric/violence from an ontological lens**

Rhetoric scholars tend to analyze the relationship between rhetoric and violence from an ontological lens. That is, they make ontological claims about what rhetoric and violence *are* and what parallels or differences might exist between them. This perspective tends to

re-describe rhetoric vis-à-vis the characteristics, effects, and tropes of violence (or vice versa).<sup>14</sup>

In an extensive treatment of rhetoric and violence, Hayes outlined five major “topoi” that regularly resurface in scholarship on the rhetoric/violence divide. These topoi, which range from rhetoric “exist[ing] completely outside violence” to the “violent functions of rhetoric,”<sup>15</sup> demonstrate how prominent the ontological perspective has been throughout contemporary and classical rhetorical theory.<sup>16</sup> Other scholars, like Holling, have followed the ontological path by describing a “discursive violence” that “may be understood as harm committed in/by discourse.”<sup>17</sup> This form of violence erases other perspectives and includes harmful “word choice, essentialist characterizations, and effacement of structural violence.”<sup>18</sup> Drawing on theorists like Butler and Jawani, Holling argues that rhetoric can become violent during certain conditions of deployment – such as when popular news accounts create a “negative valence” by reporting on gang violence in Mexico without describing the U.S. government’s complicity in that violence. This echoes work by Houdek,<sup>19</sup> McCann,<sup>20</sup> and McKinnon,<sup>21</sup> who argue that racist and sexist rhetorics (for example) can be more or less indistinguishable from the structural violence with which they are complicit. Rhetoric, according to this argument, is subsumed into a field of violence when it becomes a necessary component of oppressive social structures that reproduce physical suffering.

Most of this work does not explore ontology for ontology’s sake, but rather uses it as a form of political diagnosis that seeks to theorize the bounds of unacceptable conduct. One of the features most commonly seen in these ontological investigations, therefore, is an emphasis on civility. In these cases, rhetoric and violence are placed on a continuum, whereby examples of rhetoric are held to gradually veer toward the violent until, at some crucial point (usually upon some violation of civil decorum), they cross over into the domain of violence. Certain kinds of rhetoric – typically those based in sober deliberation and civil, respectful dialogue – are found on one end of the spectrum, with the controversy being, of course, where the crossover to violence occurs. A classic example of this ontological analysis was offered by Foss and Griffin, who argued that rhetoric-theorized-as-persuasion embodies violence. Opposed to viewing rhetoric as an “attempt to control others through persuasive strategies designed to effect change,”<sup>22</sup> Foss and Griffin offer an “invitational” vision of rhetoric based in civility, “interactional goals,” and “cooperation and respect.”<sup>23</sup> For Foss and Griffin, and many others, an ontological analysis of the rhetoric/violence relationship can help us delineate socio-politically valuable forms of rhetoric from those rhetorics which cause fear, harm, and injustice (and which, therefore, creep into the conceptual domain of violence).

A number of contemporary scholars have expanded on this theme, reframing the domain of violence by critiquing the “violent” or “weaponized” potential of uncivil rhetoric. Reflecting on an episode that took place during the first Obama administration, Engels outlines “a vision of civic deliberation”<sup>24</sup> that could serve as an “antidote to violence.”<sup>25</sup> Opposed to this, however, is a “violent rhetoric” that “naturally leads to violent outbursts.”<sup>26</sup> For Engels, screaming and shouting can embody this kind of violence, such as when GOP Congressman Joe Wilson yelled “You lie!” at President Obama during a 2009 joint session of Congress. Engels argues that the heated speech of such “raging and resentful citizens”<sup>27</sup> can sometimes turn into “violent rhetoric,” a variant of radical discourse that, through its “flammable” incivility,<sup>28</sup> crosses a dissociative line

into the realm of violence. While Engels has much more to say about rhetoric and violence, his interesting take on the ontological boundaries of rhetoric/violence exemplifies a path frequently taken by scholars who have explored this problem: muddying the definitional boundaries of rhetoric/violence, dissociating rhetoric into its positive (civil, deliberative) and less palatable manifestations (violent, flammable, weaponized, etc.), and then warning about those rhetorics that transgress the bounds of civility and hence drift into the domain of the violent. Ultimately, there is a political judgment – sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit – in this labeling of violent or “weaponized” rhetoric: that it should be feared, or even regulated, *like* a weapon.

Outlining the threat posed by “weaponized communication,” Mercieca defines this phenomenon as

the strategic use of communication as an instrumental tool and as an aggressive means to gain compliance and avoid accountability. ... Dangerous demagogues not only use weaponized communication as an authoritarian uses violence, but weaponized communication itself is a form of violence.<sup>29</sup>

Mercieca developed this perspective when one of her academic panels was crashed by flamboyant radio host Alex Jones, who leads the right-wing media outfit InfoWars. Jones’ ensuing weaponization of speech, according to Mercieca, was characterized by the fact that he “created political theater, declared it the one and only truth, and in the process exposed the panelists to public ridicule and malicious communication from InfoWars supporters. Jones used a bullhorn to talk over the panel, thereby gaining compliance.”<sup>30</sup> For Mercieca, Jones’ crude, loud, and irreverent brand of political shock theater exemplifies how communication can cross the boundary between rhetoric and violence. Rhetoric, in the hands of a “dangerous demagogue” like Jones, can experience something like a phase change that propels it into the domain of the violent – especially when contrasted with the civil, sober discussion that is common in academic panels. Once this threshold of “violence” was met, of course, the bounds of political legitimacy had been crossed: Jones quickly found himself escorted out of the conference by the local police department. Crucially, therefore, Mercieca is not alone in seeing Jones’ words as weapons. As she notes, just a few months earlier Jones’ notorious incivility had gotten him kicked off Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; he had been removed from Apple’s and Microsoft’s app sites; and PayPal ceased processing his company’s payments and donations.

### **Civility and liberal governance**

We could bring up numerous other contemporary examples, such as struggles over mask policies, vaccine mandates, critical race theory, and similar controversies that have elicited passionate and sometimes creative defenses, attacks, and spectacles. But the Alex Jones controversy brings into clear view the political importance of the present theoretical problem. While many of these ontological analyses of rhetoric/violence have given us important insights into a perennial problem in intellectual history, I would like to follow a different, though related, path – one that focuses on the cultural and political significance of constituting violence vis-à-vis rhetoric. As scholars like DeLuca and Peoples have recognized<sup>31</sup> – and as I think most of our colleagues writing on this topic would

agree – rhetoric and violence are shifting and mutually constitutive categories that are, nonetheless, historically determined into more or less readily recognizable types of behavior. One does not have to believe that the “violence of rhetoric” is an “oxymoron”<sup>32</sup> to recognize that these concepts’ mutual construction is of considerable political importance. While rhetoric and violence might not be determinable in any ultimate sense, liberalism thrives on maintaining these distinctions and – especially – on modulating their boundaries in order to marginalize undesirable behavior and suppress threatening subjects. In an analysis of this problem, de Lauretis has critiqued the “order of language which speaks violence – [which] names certain behaviors and events as violent, but not others, and constructs objects and subjects of violence, and hence violence as a social fact.”<sup>33</sup> Because the construction of violence – along with its subjects, objects, and technologies – is a “*social* fact,” the boundaries between rhetoric and violence are mobilized, tweaked, and disambiguated according to shifting political demands. Therefore, while ontological theorizations of rhetoric/violence can lead to something of a theoretical impasse, focusing on constructions of “violence” – and, in particular, on how these constructions are deployed to regulate citizens’ political behavior – provides an attractive alternative.

As the Barack Obama and Alex Jones examples illustrate, violence (and, for that matter, “violent” rhetoric) is frequently constituted via determinations of incivility; this reconstitution accords with traditional strategies and institutions of liberal governance, as it simply imposes new criteria onto an already established field of police intervention (i.e. the suppression of violence). Accordingly, “uncivil” rhetorics are frequently suppressed because their form or content are alleged to more or less directly manifest violence. As Stuckey and O’Rourke have pointed out, allegations of incivility “can be used as a silencing mechanism. If politeness is the standard, arguments – and those who make them – can be dismissed as being ‘uncivil,’ regardless of their merits.”<sup>34</sup> Civility, as Stuckey and O’Rourke argue, is a mobile concept that immediately establishes the limits of permissible political and rhetorical action. This point has been hammered home by Chávez, who proclaims:

I have never been under any illusion that dialogue, debate, and deliberation are the best modes to achieving black, queer, feminist, or any other kind of liberation. In fact, I am deeply suspicious of the ways that the righteous outrage of the oppressed, particularly people of color, is often suppressed and disciplined in the name of dialogue and civility.<sup>35</sup>

Here, Chávez recognizes that charges of civility are often used to quash dissent, discipline the “righteous outrage” of the oppressed, and reinforce a conservative model of polite deliberative politics.<sup>36</sup> With this observation Chávez follows in the footsteps of Lozano-Reich and Cloud, who have described how “oppressive charges of indecorum”<sup>37</sup> have been used to circumscribe the politics of resistance. For Lozano-Reich and Cloud, “dominant groups have repeatedly enacted civilizing strategies to effectively silence and punish marginalized groups.”<sup>38</sup> Hence, by recognizing the potential for civility enforcement to function as a strategy of political regulation, Chávez and Lozano-Reich and Cloud move the conversation onto a different register.<sup>39</sup>

While we still have much to learn about how invocations of civility are used to silence marginalized groups, this piece approaches the cultivation of rhetorical civility as a more general priority of liberal government. Rhetorical civility, of course, is not only promoted

as a method of political repression; it is a theme and goal of diverse programs of liberal government that aim to enrich the subject via cultural pedagogy in nonviolent, deliberative politics. From this perspective, we can extend and enrich the analysis offered by scholars like Chávez and Lozano-Reich and Cloud by studying how training in nonviolent, rhetorical civility lies at the core of our formation as liberal subjects. As Balibar writes, the cultivation of civility provides the backbone of what Foucault called “governmentality”<sup>40</sup> – that style of conduct regulation, fundamental to liberalism, that “manag[es] the public by having it manage itself.”<sup>41</sup> Operating through diverse public and private authorities, governmentality functions by establishing a limited realm of possible citizen conduct and then empowering subjects to maximize their freedom within that limited realm. This liberal approach to civic empowerment relies on various actors and institutions – such as celebrities, political and cultural authorities, schools, media programming, and after-school initiatives – to habituate citizens to acceptable ranges of belief and behavior. According to Balibar,<sup>42</sup> this non-coercive style of governance operates in part by cultivating good manners, courtesy, and related personality traits that lend themselves to rhetorical civility, a disciplined work ethic, and other desirable conduct. Thus formed, citizens are prepared to pursue their freedom within these established bounds of permissible behavior. Hence, as Balibar notes, civility forms the very core of liberal governmentality: “at least one of the aspects that Foucault eventually called ‘governmentality’ (as ‘control of the way individuals govern themselves’ ...), is precisely a search for the various historical modalities or strategies of civility.”<sup>43</sup> Because nonviolence, in the words of Lawlor, “defines the aim of liberalism,”<sup>44</sup> an essential mission of liberal government is to produce nonviolent subjects who are politically engaged yet surrender violence to the state. Ultimately, these wide-ranging *technē* of liberal government reinforce what Weber long ago recognized as the liberal state’s defining privilege: its monopoly on legitimate violence<sup>45</sup> (a contestable distinction which, ipso facto, produces illegitimate violence).

### Governing violence with rhetorical culture

Cultural training in civility and nonviolence, therefore, is a constant and essential element of liberal government. Central to this training, as Hunter points out, is education in “the arts of civility” – “liberal education,” he argues, was unique in that it “had civility as its object rather than specific vocational expertise. ... The literary arts, bodily disciplines, and techniques of self-management and presentation that comprised this education had as their object the formation of personality in the form of civility.”<sup>46</sup> While Hunter is mostly concerned with how English education is used to inculcate civility, scholars like Rood<sup>47</sup> have begun to recognize that we could just as easily apply this kind of analysis to rhetorical culture. Even more so than English education, rhetorical training takes place both inside and outside the classroom, and its influence extends far beyond instruction in the formal rhetorical tradition to include preparation in diverse skills and habits of deliberative conduct. By “crafting virtue” through its peculiar construction of public morality,<sup>48</sup> rhetorical culture is characterized by ongoing preparation for life in McCloskey’s “rhetorical society” – the nonviolent, liberal society characterized by civil discussion, negotiation, and moral suasion. Rhetorical culture, then, has an even more direct relationship to political life than English education.

Accordingly, while Hunter focuses on how English education experiments with the creation of a culturally enriched subject, a similar governance-focused analysis of rhetoric would zero in on how the promotion of rhetorical culture governs public behavior by establishing permissible forms of political action that can be contrasted with violence.

Our society's widespread cultivation of rhetorical subjectivity, therefore, holds important clues about rhetoric's perceived value in promoting liberalism and "developing democratic dispositions."<sup>49</sup> As Greene has suggested, critical scholars of rhetoric and communication "should pay closer attention to ... the different techniques and technologies organized to transform individuals into a communicating subject."<sup>50</sup> According to Greene, we ought to analyze "institutions (state and non-state actors) that promote civic engagement among high school kids, discourses drawn from progressive education that encourage communication as a means of citizenship participation, [and] rhetorical technologies like learning how to debate."<sup>51</sup> Because rhetorical values are so essential to liberal citizenship, Greene argues that we can learn much about liberal governance if we turn our attention to the diverse ways in which citizens are trained to be rhetorical subjects. As Greene and Hicks have argued, an

under-appreciated aspect of the productive power of cultural governance resides in the generation of subjects who come to understand themselves as speaking subjects willing to regulate and transform their communicative behaviors for the purpose of improving their political, economic, cultural, and affective relationships.<sup>52</sup>

For Greene and Hicks, this cultivation of rhetorical subjects is an essential aspect of liberal governance.

Liberal power, therefore, thrives on the reproduction of a diverse range of activities – speech, negotiation, debate, orderly protest, and so on – that are promoted as acceptable alternatives to militant political action. As such, this process is at once pedagogical and exclusionary: it teaches subjects to live in accord with liberal standards of political conduct, while it also marginalizes and forbids alternative modes of being political. This is particularly clear in certain spheres of contemporary U.S. rhetorical culture, especially those rooted in overtly liberal models of citizen production. For example, urban debate programs – whose driving purpose is to lure disadvantaged students away from street life by instructing them in academic speech and debate – routinely tout their success in cultivating nonviolent civic engagement. The motto of Atlanta's urban debate league, "Words, Not Weapons,"<sup>53</sup> clearly showcases this line of thinking. One of the founders of the urban debate movement, Melissa Maxcy Wade, eloquently describes the governmental logic at work with these programs:

These kids, in many ways, have been largely abandoned by traditional support systems. ... There are a lot of family issues around employment, substance abuse, and other challenges. There is a lot of fighting and, if you have a dispute, you hit. We work a lot with respect issues and learning to use our words so we don't have to use our fists.<sup>54</sup>

Criticizing the liberal idealism that drives many of these urban debate programs, Reid-Brinkley re-tropes this words/weapons discourse as "ghetto kids gone good."<sup>55</sup> Yet their arguable political naivete aside, these initiatives are actually founded on a serious principle of liberal citizen formation – that the ideal subject of civility is a rhetorical subject, a subject who engages in civil dialogue instead of beating up a classmate; who

participates in an after-school debate program instead of heading to the streets; who negotiates with her bank rather than tossing a rock through its front window; who advocates compromise and gradualism instead of change by any means necessary – i.e. the civil, mild-mannered subject who calmly settles disputes with her mind and mouth instead of with her fists. In a word: liberal citizens are speaking subjects, not violent ones. Yet as we will see in the next section, the matter is made more complicated by the conceptual mobility of the violent. While the state and liberal institutions have a vested interest in suppressing citizens’ physical violence in general, these entities govern political conduct by marking certain subjects and behaviors as violent (while marking others, of course, as nonviolent). This marking illustrates how governmentality entails not just the promotion of civility and the suppression of physical violence; it also requires an ongoing renegotiation of what is sensible as violence – and hence, an ongoing reconstruction of certain subjects as dangerous, criminal, and unworthy of political legitimacy.

### **Governing with civility and “violence” in D.C.**

As we have discussed thus far, this strategy of cultural governance has two interrelated expressions: attempts to promote rhetorical subjectivity at the expense of physical violence (especially political violence), and ongoing reconstructions of “violence” in order to impose civility on radical subjects. While this is certainly a time-tested and ongoing process, in recent years numerous radical activists and social movements have been targeted for censorship and legal persecution due to politically fraught constructions of rhetoric and violence. To examine an exemplary sliver of this process, the following examples demonstrate how cultural governance not only emerges from immersive institutions like schools and workplaces; governmentality is a multidirectional exercise of power that morally forms subjects via diverse cultural pressures. As scholars like Johnson<sup>56</sup> and Pepper<sup>57</sup> have argued, cultural and political authorities can perform important articulations of governmentality by establishing and reinforcing behavioral norms among their audiences.

This attempt to cultivate rhetorical subjectivity can be seen in the ways that these authorities strive to marginalize and reform antifascists and their potential supporters. As I’ve already noted, this process is both pedagogical and exclusionary: on the one hand, these tactics reinforce the bounds of acceptable political conduct; at the same time, they also manipulate U.S. law and anti-violence corporate policies to persecute activists and/or banish them from social media platforms and other realms of political participation. For example, during the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation hearings in September 2018, antifascist protestors publicly challenged Senator Ted Cruz and other Republican members of Congress over their support for Kavanaugh. During the hearings a crew of antifascist activists entered a restaurant and began shouting at Cruz, ultimately prompting him to walk out. Afterward the protestors tweeted a video of the incident, adding a series of tweets that included: “Fascists not welcome!” and “[Cruz] can’t eat in peace [because] his politics are an attack on all of us.”<sup>58</sup> Tweeting from #SmashRacismDC, the activists urged their followers: “Fuck civility, fight now.”<sup>59</sup>

Yet this, of course, was not the end of the story. Conservative commentators seized on the protest, using their public platforms to reassert standards of liberal decorum by

expelling Smash Racism DC from public discourse. To do so, they branded the Kavanaugh protestors as enemies of civility that were breaking social media platforms' rules against violence. *Newsbusters*, a conservative media outfit, responded with the incredulous headline: "Antifa Group 'Smash Racism' Still Allowed on Facebook, Instagram."<sup>60</sup> *The Blaze*, a neoconservative news magazine led by Glenn Beck, responded in kind: "Facebook, Twitter Won't Ban Leftists Who Posted Video of Ted Cruz and Wife Being Harassed at Dinner."<sup>61</sup> For these commentators, the opportunity to score a few blows in the battle for the reconstitution of violence proved too tempting: they took the familiar step of stretching the gravity of what the antifascist protestors had done to Senator Cruz. According to these personalities, the protest crossed into the domain of the violent and was, therefore, reclassified in criminal terms: it was "harassment," "trespassing," public endangerment, an act that "harms innocent bystanders."<sup>62</sup> In the words of one conservative writer,

The mob entered that restaurant to maliciously disrupt any feeling of normalcy and safety for the senator, and in so doing robbed every person there of her own sense of calm and security. ... While harassing a public official endangers that individual, trespassing in order to do so also endangers everyone around.<sup>63</sup>

By describing this event in the language of harm, security, and safety, these writers attempted to propel this protest into the domain of the violent. And in this, they and their allies eventually succeeded: Smash Racism DC's Twitter account was soon thereafter disabled for violations of Twitter's anti-violence and anti-harassment policies.<sup>64</sup> Although Republicans are often quick to stand up for "free speech" in the face of censorious "snowflakes," this example illustrates their own skill at conceptually stretching violence to disenfranchise their political enemies.

But Republicans are not the only ones who use their public platforms in this way. While certain Democratic political figures have tried to stretch the boundaries of U.S. political decorum during this time, others have turned against their peers in the name of fighting incivility and cultivating good liberal subjects. One of the central figures in this controversy has been California Congresswoman Maxine Waters, who routinely took much of the credit for radicalizing the Democratic Party's resistance to the notoriously un-civil President Trump.<sup>65</sup> In summer 2018, for example, Waters was condemned for encouraging her supporters to engage in the kind of behavior undertaken by the antifascists who cornered Ted Cruz. Speaking to her constituents, Waters remarked:

Already, you have members of your Cabinet that are being booed out of restaurants. ... [You] have protestors taking up at their house, who say, "No peace, no sleep! No peace, no sleep!" ... Let's make sure we show up wherever we have to show up and if you see anybody from that Cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd and you push back on them, and you tell them they're not welcome anymore, anywhere.<sup>66</sup>

Waters, growing tired of Washington's tedious civility, called for a change to the resistance's rules of engagement.

Yet many of Waters' opponents seized this opportunity to recast her remarks as a "call for political violence"<sup>67</sup> and an attempt to "incite violence."<sup>68</sup> Waters' Democrat colleagues responded in kind, also attempting to regulate the radical tendencies of

Waters and her supporters. The moderate standard bearers of the Democratic Party – folks like Nancy Pelosi, David Axelrod, and Chuck Schumer – immediately set out to marginalize the implied violence of Waters’ confrontational politics and urged their followers to abide by the strictures of liberal civility. Reminding her audience that incivility is “unacceptable,” Pelosi urged: “we must strive to make America beautiful again. Trump’s daily lack of civility has provoked responses that are predictable but unacceptable.”<sup>69</sup> In an effort to reassert the bounds of the “acceptable,” Pelosi marginalized her colleague and urged her five million Twitter followers to reclaim America’s heritage of “beautiful” civility.

Expanding upon Pelosi’s tepid response, David Axelrod, prominent advisor to Presidents Clinton and Obama, complained that Waters had simply reinstated the illiberal politics of the Trump administration:

Trump has shredded the idea of civility of our politics from the moment he began running for president. ... I absolutely believe that people ought to organize, they ought to vote, they ought to donate, they ought to run, but this is not the answer. ... [If] you want to make change, you make change with the tools that democracy offers. ... I say this not because I’m trying to defend the Trump administration, but because I’m trying to defend civility as a value in our democracy.<sup>70</sup>

Axelrod, a deeply entrenched beneficiary of America’s traditional rituals of political civility, urged leftists to reject those political “tools” that contradict liberal norms. For Axelrod, “civility” requires a faith that political communication (campaigning and voting) and money (donating) are the timeless pillars of American democracy. Anyone who flirts with more militant and creative alternatives is simply “shredding” the very condition of our democracy’s existence, an attitude Axelrod reiterated when he urged then-candidate Joe Biden to take an “implacable stand” against the political “violence” cropping up in the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.<sup>71</sup>

The response of U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer, however, provides the most interesting insight into how “civility” is used to establish the rhetoric/violence divide and assert the politically unacceptable. When Schumer condemned Waters’ remarks from the Senate floor, he asserted:

We all have to remember to treat our fellow Americans ... with the kind of civility and respect we expect will be afforded to us. ... I strongly disagree with those who advocate harassing folks if they don’t agree with you. ... If you disagree with someone on something, stand up, make your voice heard, explain why you think they’re wrong and you’re right, make the argument. Protest peacefully. If you disagree with a politician, organize your fellow citizens to action and vote them out of office. But no one should call for the harassment of political opponents. ... That’s not right. That’s not American.<sup>72</sup>

Schumer instructs CNN’s audience that a healthy political process – in fact, a quintessentially *American* political process – is characterized by “civility and respect.” Yet for Schumer, Americans’ responsibility to “stand up and be heard” does not extend to the more radical activism advocated by Congresswoman Waters. The pivot term, of course, is the adverb *peacefully*, which epitomizes the political civility promoted by Schumer and his moderate peers. The whiff of militancy present in Waters’ brand of activism, or in that exemplified by the antifascists protesting Ted Cruz, was reframed by Schumer as a form of violence – one that threatens the very foundations of American

democracy. Schumer's message, therefore, served as an important articulation of liberal governmentality – using the resources of the rhetoric/violence couplet, Schumer marginalized Waters for her violations of decorum, instructed CNN viewers in the boundaries of permissible politics, and implored his audience to govern their behavior in accord with established liberal norms.

The racial element in the civility policing that Waters faced is crystal clear – as Lozano-Reich and Cloud have pointed out, “women of color have been silenced through civilizing strategies that deem legitimately angry speech to be ‘uppity’ or ‘illiterate’”<sup>73</sup> (or, in this case, “un-civil” and “un-American”). Yet this problem runs deeper than racialized civility policing. Indeed, Lozano-Reich and Cloud perhaps underestimate the problem when they lament that decades of critical feminist activism and scholarship have not succeeded in “overcom[ing] oppressive stereotypes so that women of color can be viewed as speaking subjects, and not as uncivilized subjects needing a firm hand.”<sup>74</sup> In this case, Waters received a firm hand not just because of her rhetorical style, but because she was willing to advocate a politics beyond speech – a politics that veered on the physically confrontational and violent. Pelosi, Schumer, Axelrod, and others in the Democratic Party attempted to turn Waters back into a “speaking subject” with their rebukes and condemnations. These figures’ main “civilizing strategy,” after all, was the cultivation of a rhetorical subjectivity that completely rejected the politics of violence. This civilizing process, ultimately, exposes the depth of the problem at hand. While liberal strategies of governance certainly aim at governing a well-mannered and civilized speaking subject, their more fundamental priority is ensuring that the subject remains within the orbit of the rhetorical and does not threaten the state’s monopoly on violence. This was Waters’ more fundamental transgression: not that she spoke in a shocking or furious fashion, but that she threatened to introduce into citizens’ political imaginations a style of resistance that might reject speech altogether (and, hence, that might reject the state’s defining monopoly).

## Conclusion

Culture has always contributed to the subduing of revolutionary as well as of barbaric instincts. – Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno<sup>75</sup>

Expanding on previous work in rhetoric and civility, this article has offered a novel take on the role of rhetorical culture in habituating citizens to liberal political norms. This strategy relies on a cultural and legal dichotomy of rhetoric (the permitted) and violence (the prohibited); yet this dichotomy also fuels an entrepreneurial expansion of violence’s domain, driving attempts to reframe certain subjects and certain rhetorical acts as violent (and hence to prohibit, marginalize, and/or silence them). As I’ve emphasized throughout this piece, we are seeing how words and weapons – once so conceptually distinct, at least in U.S. cultural and legal discourse<sup>76</sup> – have been pushed into a zone of indistinction that favors politically elastic constructions of the violent. The rhetoric/violence boundary thus becomes a theater of conflict in which actors seek to delegitimize their opponents by recalibrating the domain of violence (and hence the domain of the prohibited); and one of the main ways this conflict manifests is in arguments over “civility” and the “dangerous” or “weaponized” character of contemporary protests and political discourse. A

major conclusion of this analysis is that rhetorical culture, along the lines drawn above by Horkheimer and Adorno, is managed by cultural and political authorities as a counter-revolutionary apparatus that forestalls the development of radical political subjectivities that might threaten liberal democracy. As Sloterdijk would caustically put it, these strategies take part in a grand “project of domestication.”<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, governance strategies based in a liberal, civility-based divide of rhetoric/violence are constricting the political domain during a moment especially ripe for substantive change.

One crucial way in which this functions today is in the realm of digital politics and dissent management. Consider, for instance, how this has taken place within social media platforms like Twitter, an absolutely crucial site of public discourse today. Once promoting itself in self-righteously libertarian terms, as “the free speech wing of the free speech party,”<sup>78</sup> since Trump’s election Twitter has gradually recalibrated its censorship policies to stifle “violent” rhetoric (including, of course, its ultimate banning of Trump after January 6, 2021). The company’s “Twitter Rules” website now proclaims that the platform prohibits “violence, harassment, and other similar types of behavior”<sup>79</sup> – in fact, that is the top assertion on the “Rules” page. These notoriously vague policies have emboldened a culture of doxing and censorship entrepreneurship that has pushed activists to shift a great deal of their political energy toward policing and marginalizing radical forms of speech and political action. On August 19, 2020, Facebook expanded its “Dangerous Individuals and Organizations Policy” to censor and remove users who, according to the company, “promote political violence.”<sup>80</sup> While a number of right-wingers were hit by this purge, Facebook’s vague constructions of “political violence” have also led to a large swath of leftists and antifascists being thrown off the network.<sup>81</sup> This reactionary embrace of censorship has kicked off a logic of escalation that subverts and distorts the realm of the political: as activists learn they can hurt their political opponents by engaging Facebook’s political censors, an even greater degree of American party-politics has devolved into a tedious struggle over who can be silenced by virtue of their “violent” rhetoric.

One consequence of this is that, as progressives and radicals dox and de-platform one another into oblivion, centrist liberalism – which carries out its own de-platforming operations against the periphery – secures an even more exclusive share of public discourse. This has not only given rise to politically dubious censorship wars; it also serves digital capitalism’s quest to reconstitute politics, along with all other aspects of life, as a media-dependent and increasingly media-exclusive sphere of action<sup>82</sup> – and, accordingly, to colonize and enclose as much political activity as possible.<sup>83</sup> This colonization of resistant politics, as Bratich points out, is a key front in today’s war on domestic dissent: “tech companies have become full partners with professional journalism, intelligence agencies, and pundits in a new nexus to wage a war on dissent via counterinsurgency.”<sup>84</sup> Attacks on “violent” or “weaponized” rhetorics – even if these attacks are rooted, as in many cases, in idealistic politics – can support this counterinsurgency by adopting liberalism’s political anxieties, administering its civility standards, and, thereby, reinforcing a bourgeois vision of the politically possible. As Stahl recognizes, conceptualizing rhetoric in terms of weaponization and violence justifies a crackdown on dissent whose eventual victims will most certainly include our own allies: “free expression, which has functioned for so long as a means to police state power, will ultimately be redefined as an object to be policed in the name of prosecuting a ‘new kind of

war.”<sup>85</sup> If we prosecute a war against “violent” rhetoric in the name of civility, we can be sure that, as with every war, innocents will not be spared. But this war, ultimately, is not really about “free expression.” More than that, it is about liberalism’s astonishing skill at absorbing threats and eliminating dissent, especially by transforming its enemies into friends.<sup>86</sup> Liberalism does this by forcing its enemies to adopt its own rules of engagement and, in doing so, ensures that its enemies can be managed by police, legal, and cultural authorities who are accustomed to using the rhetoric/violence opposition to suppress threatening subjects and threatening behavior. It is up to us, then, to refine our “un-civil tongues” in order to develop some creative new rules of engagement – ones undisciplined by the state’s favorite monopolies and the police logics that sustain them.

## Notes

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