Revolutionary Symbolism in America.
Speech by Kenneth Burke to American Writers' Congress, April 26, 1935

When considering how people have cooperated, in either conservative or revolutionary movements of the past, we find that there is always some unifying principle about which their attachments as a group are polarized. I do not refer to such mere insignia as tricolor, hammer and sickle, swastika, crucifix, or totem pole—but to the subtle complex of emotions and attitudes for which such insignia are little more than the merest labels.

From a strictly materialistic point of view, such symbols are pure nonsense. Food, tools, shelter, productive technique—these things are the "realist" part of our vocabulary; they correspond to objects that can be seen and felt, and to operations that can be clearly and obviously performed. But the communal relationships by which a group is bound do not possess such primary reality. However vital they are in promoting historic processes, they are "myths," quite as the gods of Homer were myths. To search for them critically is to dissolve them, while a few rudimentary "realities" take their place. If you find a man attached to some cause, and keep pressing him with questions, he will not be able to point out the nature of his attachment in the way he might if you asked him to point to his house. Yet for all the illusive character of his attachment, we know that it may be a genuine social motive behind his actions.

"Myths" may be wrong, or they may be used to bad ends—but they cannot be dispensed with. In the last analysis, they are our basic psychological tools for working together. A hammer is a carpenter's tool; a wrench is a mechanic's tool; and a "myth" is the social tool for welding the sense of interrelationship by which the carpenter and the mechanic, though differently occupied, can work together for common social ends. In this sense a myth that works well is as real as food, tools, and shelter are. As compared with the reality of material objects, however, we might say that the myth deals with a secondary order of reality. Totem, race, godhead, nationality, class, lodge, guild—all such are the "myths" that have made various ranges and kinds of
social cooperation possible. They are not "illusions," since they perform a very real and necessary social function in the organizing of the mind. But they may look illusory when they survive as fossils from the situations for which they were adapted into changed situations for which they are not adapted.

Lasswell holds that a revolutionary period is one in which the people drop their allegiance to one myth, or symbol, and shift to another in its place. However, when a symbol is in the process of losing its vitality as a device for polarizing social cooperation, there are apt to be many rival symbols competing to take its place. A symbol probably loses its vitality when the kinds of cooperation it promotes—and with which its destiny is united—have ceased to be serviceable. The symbol of bourgeois nationalism is in such a state of decay to-day, for instance—hence the attempt of Communists to put the symbol of class in its place. Similarly the Technocrats, attempting to profit by the prestige which the technological expert enjoys in the contemporary framework of values, would polarize allegiance around the symbol of the engineer. A project like the Douglas Social Credit plan, whatever its economic feasibility may or may not be, has no such symbol—hence, movements of this sort become objects of popular allegiance only when some distinct personality arises to champion them, and to polarize group allegiance about himself as an individual. In this category fall the procedures of men like Huey Long and Father Coughlin—and I need not examine, before a pro-Communist audience, the tendency of such individual polarizations to trick the allegiance of the people by deflecting their attention from the principal faults of their system. It is wholesome to give allegiance, even to a crook—but the mere fact that the tendency is wholesome is no guaranty that the people will not suffer for their wholesomeness.

The Communists generally focus their scheme of allegiance about the symbol of the worker, which they would put in the place of a misused nationalism as the polarizing device about which our present attempts at historic cooperation should cluster. Accordingly, it is the propaganda aspect of the symbol that I shall center upon—considering the symbol particularly as a device for spreading the areas of allegiance.

In the first place, I assume that a symbol must embody an idea. The symbol appeals to us as an incentive because it suggests traits which we should like to share. Yet there are few people who really want to work, let us say, as a human cog in an automobile factory, or as gatherers of vegetables on a big truck farm. Such rigorous ways of life enlist our sympathies, but not our ambitions. Our ideal is as far as possible to eliminate such kinds of work, or to reduce its strenuousness to a minimum. Some people, living overly sedentary lives, may like to read of harsh physical activity (as they once enjoyed Wild West fiction)—but Hollywood knows only too well that the people engaged in such kinds of effort are vitalized mainly by some vague hope that they may some day escape it. "Adult education" in capitalist America to-day is centered in the efforts of our economic mercenaries (our advertising men and sales organizations) to create a maximum desire for commodities consumed under expensive conditions—and Hollywood appeals to the worker mainly by picturing the qualities of life in which this commercially stimulated desire is gratified. The question arises: Is the symbol of the worker accurately attuned to us, as so conditioned by the reactionary forces in control of our main educational channels?

I tentatively suggest that it is not. By this I do not mean that a proletarian emphasis should be dropped from revolutionary books. The rigors of the worker must certainly continue to form a major part of revolutionary symbolism, if only for the reason that here the worst features of capitalist exploitation are concentrated. But the basic symbol, it seems to me, should be focused somewhat differently. Fortunately, I am not forced to advocate any great change—though I do think that the shift I propose, while minor in itself, leads in the end to quite different emphases in our modes of propaganda. The symbol I should plead for, as more basic, more of an ideal incentive, than that
folkways than is the corresponding term, "the masses," both in spontaneous popular usage and as stimulated by our political demagogues. I should add that, in an interview published recently in the New York World-Telegram, Clarence Hathaway frequently used a compound of the two in the form: "the masses of the people."

The symbol of "the people," as distinct from the proletarian symbol, also has the tactical advantage of pointing more definitely in the direction of unity (which in itself is a sound psychological tendency, for all that it is now misused by nationalists to mask the conditions of disunity). It contains the ideal, the ultimate classless feature which the revolution would bring about—and for this reason seems richer as a symbol of allegiance. It can borrow the advantages of nationalistic conditioning, and at the same time be used to combat the forces that hide their mass prerogatives behind a communal ideology.

The acceptance of "the people" as the basic symbol also has the great virtue that it makes for less likelihood of schematization on the part of our writers. So far at least, the proletarian novel has been oversimplified, leading to a negative symbol (that enlists our sympathies) rather than to a positive symbol (that incorporates our ideals). The symbol of "the people" should make for greater breadth in a writer's allegiance. By informing his work mainly from the standpoint of this positive symbol, he would come to see, I believe, that a poet does not sufficiently glorify his political cause by pictures of suffering and revolt. Rather, a poet makes his soundest contribution in this wise: He shows himself alive to all the aspects of contemporary effort and thought (in contrast with a certain anti-intellectualist, obscurantist trend among some of the strictly proletarian school, who tend to imply that there is some disgrace attached to things of the mind). I can understand how such resistance arises, since the many channels of thought are in control of reactionaries—but to turn against mind). I can understand how such resistance arises, since the many channels of thought are in control of reactionaries—but to turn against mind). I can understand how such resistance arises, since the many channels of thought are in control of reactionaries—but to turn against mind). I can understand how such resistance arises, since the many channels of thought are in control of reactionaries—but to turn against mind). I can understand how such resistance arises, since the many channels of thought are in control of reactionaries—but to turn against mind). I can understand how such resistance arises, since the many channels of thought are in control of reactionaries—but to turn against mind). I can understand how such resistance arises, since the many channels of thought are in control of reactionaries—but to turn against mind). 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him to use their vocabulary, their values, their symbols, insofar as this is possible.

For we must remember that among the contradictions of capitalism we must also include the contradictions of anti-capitalist propaganda. Marxism is war to the ends of peace, heresy to the ends of unity, organization to the ends of freedom, glorification of toil to the ends of greater leisure, revolution in the interests of conservation, etc. Such a confusion cannot be settled once and for all. It is our particular "burden" at this particular stage of history. In the last analysis, art strains towards universalization. It tends to overlap imaginatively the class divisions of the moment and go after modes of thought that would apply to a society freed of class divisions. It seeks to consider the problems of man, not of classes of men. We are agreed that the current situation militates against this tendency, which is all the more reason for artists to enlist in the work of changing it. For a totally universalized art, if established in America to-day, would simply be the spiritual denial of an underlying economic disunity (the aesthetic of fascism). The strictly proletarian symbol has the useful advantage of emphasizing the temporary antagonism—but it has the disadvantage of not sufficiently embodying within its connotations the ideal incentive, the eventual state of unification that is expected to flow from it.

For this contradiction there is no wholly satisfactory solution. The closest to a satisfactory solution I can think of is simply to suggest that the imaginative artist show, in a general way, a wholesome alignment of attitudes, both political and nonpolitical. Some may and should deal specifically with strikes, lock-outs, unemployment, unsavory working conditions, organized resistance to the police, etc.—but an attempt to focus all their imaginative range within this orbit must produce an over-simplified and impoverished art, which would defeat its own purposes, falling even as propaganda, since it did not invigorate audiences by incorporating sufficient aspects of cultural glorification in its material.

I believe that the symbol of "the people" makes more naturally for such propaganda by inclusion than does the strictly proletarian symbol (which makes naturally for a propaganda by exclusion, a tendency to eliminate from one's work all that does not deal specifically with the realities of the workers' oppression—and which, by my thesis, cannot for this reason engage even the full allegiance of the workers themselves). And since the symbol of "the people" contains connotations both of oppression and of unity, it seems better than the exclusively proletarian one as a psychological bridge for linking the two conflicting aspects of a transitional, revolutionary era, which is Janus-faced, looking both forwards and back. I recognize that my suggestion bears the telltale stamp of my class, the petty bourgeoisie. And I should not dare to make it, except for a belief that it is vitally important to enlist the allegiance of this class. But I should point out, in closing, that there are really two features in my present paper, and although I think that they tend to be interconnected, they may not necessarily be. I make this point because I hope that, even if my hearers may resist my first suggestion (and I see many just grounds for their doing so), they may still accept the second. The first was that we take "the people" rather than "the worker" as our basic symbol of exhortation and allegiance. The second was that the imaginative writer seek to propagate his cause by surrounding it with as full a cultural texture as he can manage, thus thinking of propaganda not as an over-simplified, literal, explicit writing of lawyer's briefs, but as a process of broadly and generally associating his political alignment with cultural awareness in the large. I consider the first suggestion important primarily because the restricted proletarian symbol tends to militate against the full use of propaganda by inclusion. But I should not like to make your acceptance of the second absolutely dependent upon your acceptance of the first. Some writers may be able to dissociate them, and to surround the strictly proletarian symbol with sufficient richness of cultural ideals to make it appealing even as a symbol of allegiance for people who do not think of themselves primarily within the proletarian framework. But I still insist that their function as propagandists will not be complete unless they do thus propagate by inclusion, not confining themselves to a few schematic situations, but engaging the entire range of our interests, even such interests as we might have at a time of industry and peace.
Discussion of Burke’s Speech at the Congress, April 27, 1935

The second session of the American Writers’ Congress opened on the morning of April 27 in the auditorium of the New School for Social Research. The chairman was John Howard Lawson. He announced that because of the number of papers, and the need to devote most of the last session to the organization of the League of American Writers, discussion of the individual papers would have to be grouped at the end of each session instead of occurring at the end of each paper. In the main this worked out well—speakers did not duplicate each other. Before presenting the first speaker, who was Joseph Freeman, Mr. Lawson read aloud the names of those writers who had been suggested, by those who had worked for months to prepare for the Congress, as the actual presiding committee of the Congress. The nominees, all of whom were accepted by the delegates, were: Michael Blankfort, Harry Carlisle, Jack Conroy, Malcolm Cowley, Joseph Freeman, Michael Gold, Eugene Gordon, Henry Hart, Granville Hicks, Orrick Johns, John Howard Lawson, Meridel Le Sueur, Isidor Schneider, Edwin Seaver, Bernhard J. Stern and Alexander Trachtenberg. Paul Romaine was appointed recording secretary.

Two papers at the session provoked most of the discussion. These were Edwin Seaver’s “The Proletarian Novel,” and Kenneth Burke’s “Revolutionary Symbolism in America.”

Martin Russak dissented from Seaver’s contention that the proletarian novel, by definition, could be one that treated any subject matter provided it did so from the standpoint and in the interest of the proletariat. “I think the proletarian novel has got to be,” he said, “and is already becoming, a novel that deals with the working class. I don’t think our novels should be concerned with the emotions and reactions and values of the upper or middle classes or the lumpen proletariat. I don’t think the life experiences of hoboes and tramps, as depicted in some of our writing recently, is legitimate subject matter.

“I think that, if we completely understood the nature of class division, we would not say that all people are the same. In the working class we have a distinct kind of human being, a new type of human being, with an emotional life and psychology that is different, and distinct, and with which we should deal.”

Michael Gold, in discussing Jack Conroy’s paper, took issue with Mr. Russak, but also warned against the danger of “our literary movement becoming a petty bourgeois movement.” He said:

“I think some of the discussion this morning was interesting because it again contrasted two points of view which have been battling in our world of proletarian literature as long as I can remember.

“We know that our enemies have taken up the cry that proletarian literature is a literature of men with hairy chests, of slums and so forth, and that no bourgeois writer can approach these things. On the other hand, we have had all the proletarians insisting that the bourgeois writers and their themes have no place in the revolutionary movement. I think we got a little conception of that from Martin Russak. If anything has been cleared up in the last few years, it has been this point: that the revolution is a revolution led by the working class, and the lower middle classes are its allies. There is therefore room in the revolution for literature from all these groups. The viewpoint, as Edwin Seaver said, is what is important. The man with the revolutionary mind and approach can write a revolutionary book.

“So I think we must stand equally against the idea that proletarian literature has a place only for novels about the working class, that the idea that was more or less implied this morning, as well as against the idea that novels about the workers are not important.

“Some one said that when we are dealing with a class myth we can juggle this class myth around. The very acceptance of this conception, put forth by the bourgeois critic L. A. Richards, that the working class myth is on a par with other myths, with fascist myths, is a surrender at a very vital point. We cannot accept any such classification, as many of the liberals do, that communism and fascism are equal schemes for solving the problems of society, for socializing society. We cannot accept the idea that the class struggle is a myth, or that the working class is a myth.

“I think the tone of many of our papers this morning showed that our literary movement is in danger of becoming a petty bourgeois movement. I think we must guard against that. It cannot become that. It must not become that. It is our main task to see that a strong working class is developed in the United States to lead the revolutionary vanguard. We may not lead it. So I think one of the basic tasks of every writer is to stimulate and encourage and help the growth of proletarian literature which is written by workers.

“I think all of us must learn to become teachers of the working class. We must assemble around ourselves a group of talented workers who
wish to write, just as Gorky did it twenty-five years ago in Russia. We must realize that only this literature can answer these intellectual abstractions into which petty bourgeois people fall.

"A great body of proletarian literature will show the concrete facts. It will show our face. It will be the greatest argument we can present to those people who juggle with the theories of communism and fascism. We must build up a picture of what the working class in this country looks like. We must use this as a final and clinching argument—this picture of real life of real working class struggle. We must use this as the final answer we can give to the intellectual abstractions of the bourgeoisie."

The discussion of Kenneth Burke's paper centered chiefly around the reasons for resisting his suggested substitution of the symbol "people" for "worker."

It began with Allen Porter's observations that one of the propaganda devices employed by the exploiting class during periods of struggle was making the demands of the workers appear as antipathetic to the "good of the people."

"Distinguishing between the workers and the people," he said, "is deliberately undertaken to confuse, as, for example, when Father Coughlin and General Johnson last summer attacked the general strike in San Francisco on the grounds that the workers were 'holding up the people.' By using the symbol 'all of the people' the inference was made that the common interest was opposed to the interests of the workers. The same symbol was used during the general strike of 1926 in Great Britain in precisely the same way. The workers were attacking the people. The attempt to substitute 'people' for 'worker' is very dangerous from our point of view. Historically, it has been the ruse of the exploiting class to confuse the issue. Moreover, the word 'people' is historically associated with demagoguery of the most vicious sort."

Friedrich Wolf supported this view, saying:

"A great danger reposes in this formulation of 'the people.' Hitler and Rosenberg used it. They said, let us not talk any more about the workers, let us talk about the people. In 1918 it was precisely this very same thing that the German reformist leaders utilized. Scheideman and Ebert said we must have a policy that will cover the worker and the small merchant and the middle bourgeoisie. Hitlerism is a continuation of this policy. Hitler knew enough to use this ideological device as a supplement to his blackjacks and machine guns. Utilization of the myth of 'das Volk,' the people, is an essential part of the reformist approach. In my own country it has directly resulted in the fascists taking power. The symbol 'worker' must be reserved to indicate the preponderant mass of the population—the actual workers and farmers. Substitution of the symbol 'people' confuses the interests of this fundamental and all-important class and renders a picture of society that is not merely un-Marxian but one which history has proven to be necessary for the continuation of the power of the exploiting class."

Joseph Freeman, in agreeing with the attacks upon Burke's suggestion, declared that it was necessary to show why the proletariat is the sole revolutionary class. "If we consider the matter from the viewpoint of reality first and then from the literary viewpoint it is possible we may have no disagreement with Burke," he said and continued:

"The symbol of the people came with the bourgeois revolution. The bourgeoisie demanded the abolition of class privileges. Therefore it had the following of all the people. Then it turned out that the people were divided into classes. The word people then became a reactionary slogan—not because of any philosophy of myths, but because it concealed the reality, the actual living antagonism between the social classes. The type of myth represented by the word people can go so far that reality can be concealed even in the name of the proletarian revolution, even in the name of Lenin. Consider carefully the demagogy of the fascist government of Mexico. When I was in Mexico, I found state governors—one of whom became president of the republic—who used to hand out Lenin's portrait to peasant delegations. The official organ of the ruling reactionary party published special pro-Soviet supplements on November 7. It also published in full the call for our own Writers' Congress. So revolutionary are the Mexican workers and peasants, that nobody in Mexico can play politics without saying 'three cheers for the red flag' and 'three cheers for the proletarian revolution.' Even the Catholic church and its political exponents do this.

"If the proletariat can become a dangerous political myth in the hands of the reaction, how much more dangerous is the vague symbol of the people. We must not encourage such myths. We are not interested in the myth. We are interested in revealing the reality. We set up the 'symbol' of the worker because of the role which the worker plays in reality. When Hitler first came into power, most of the American bourgeois correspondents in Berlin were against him. Why were Bur- chell of the Times and the other American reporters so enthusiastic about Dimitroff and the other Communist workers on trial? Because the workers are in the most effective position to fight the reaction. Even the most proletarian of writers and intellectuals cannot call a general strike. They cannot switch off the electric lights, halt the street-cars, stop the factories, tie up the ships; they can't go out into
the streets and take rifles and fight. We heard Friedrich Wolf tell us last night why the German writers and intellectuals came over to the working class. He told us how the poet Erich Muhsam died in a Nazi prison singing the International. Why this change? Under the bloody repression of fascism, the intellectuals recognized this tremendously significant fact, that the workers alone are socially, industrially, politically in a position to shut off industry under capitalism, to take it over under socialism. The intellectuals learned that the workers alone can give militant and effective leadership to the fight against reaction.

"This is due to the social position of the proletariat. That is why it is the only revolutionary class in modern society. If some of us call for the 'positive' symbol of the people to replace the 'negative' symbol of the worker, it is because we feel that the proletariat is a concept too narrow to include the intellectuals. But we do not need to be afraid. There is no real conflict involved here. We want to be included in the progressive class—and we are included. The proletariat alone can create a just society for the whole of the people. The proletarian is not merely some one who works. An English journalist told me the other day the Prince of Wales is getting a nervous breakdown. He works too hard. As a matter of fact, the Prince of Wales does work hard—and we know what he is working for. But this does not make him a proletarian. The proletariat is the man who has nothing to sell but his labor power. He not only works but depends upon his labor solely for his existence. That is why he is the most exploited and oppressed man in capitalist society; that is why he is the only one in a position to break with that society completely. The intellectual cannot lead the fight for the new world. He has his own vested interests in the old. He finds it hard to break with the old culture. He goes to school for sixteen years, takes his Ph.D., absorbs the old ideas, functions with them—and now he feels that the proletariat wants to appropriate him of the old culture. That is terrible. He feels that the term people will include not only him but his old ideas. But he need not fear. He is in a position to fight as the worker.

"What must be kept in mind above all is the leading role which the worker plays in the transformation of society. The worker has nothing to lose but his chains. He alone is forced by his position to be revolutionary, and he alone can liberate the people. If we do not get lost in 'myths,' if we stick to the reality, it is only in the working class that the other exploited classes of society—including the intellectuals—can find leadership."

Kenneth Burke was then asked to reply to these criticisms and in the course of doing so, said:

"I was not disappointed in the response I expected when bringing up this subject. But I wish that some one had discussed the issue from my point of attack, the problem of propaganda. I think we are all agreed that we are trying to defend a position in favor of the workers, that we are trying to enlist in the cause of the workers. There is no issue about that. The important thing is: how to make ourselves effective in this particular social structure? I am trying to point out that there is a first stage where the writer's primary job is to disarm people. First you knock at the door—and not until later will you become wholly precise.

"As for my use of the word myth, I was speaking technically before a group of literary experts, hence I felt justified in using the word in a special sense. A poet's myths, I tried to make clear, are real, in the sense that they perform a necessary function. They so pattern the mind as to give it a grip upon reality. For the myth embodies a sense of relationships. But relationships cannot be pointed to, in the simple objective way in which you could point to a stone or a house. It is such a sense of relationships (I have sometimes called them 'secondary reality') that I had in mind when using the word myth.

"As for the charge that I made Communism appear like a religion: It may be a weakness on my part, but I have never taken this matter very seriously. As the Latin religio signifies a binding together, I take religion and Communism to be alike insofar as both are systems for binding people together—and the main difference at the present time resides for me in the fact that the Communist vocabulary does the binding job much more accurately than the religious vocabulary. Let us compromise by saying that Communism is an ethic, a morality. But whenever you talk about an ethic, you must talk about much the same sort of things as you would if your were talking purely and simply about religion.

"As for the use of the term people: one speaker in rebutting me actually corroborated me when he said that Lenin used the term people up to 1917. I think that we are exactly in the same position as Russia prior to Lenin.

"I probably should not have used the words positive and negative to distinguish the two types of symbol. I did not mean that there is anything negative about the worker symbol in itself, but only insofar as it tends to overly restrict a writer's range of interests and emphases. In practice it tends to focus a writer's attention upon traits that enlist our sympathies—whereas a positive symbol I meant one that enlists not only our sympathies but also our ambitions.

"Some speakers have made the point that there is no contradiction
between the worker and the people. I emphatically agree. But it was pointed out that in California the demagogues were able to give the appearance of a contradiction, to make it seem as though the workers were aligned against the people. And it is precisely the demagogic trick which the propagandist must combat. I think your symbolism has to be so molded that this apparent contradiction between workers and people cannot be set up. If you emphasize the worker symbol exclusively you give the reactionaries the best opportunity to make it seem that the workers and the people are opposed. But if you amalgamate the worker symbol with the people symbol, the very thing that was done in California cannot be done.

"I think that finishes up all the points that were made. The fundamental thing that I want to emphasize again is my belief that there is a different problem confronting the propagandist from that which confronts the organizer. The propagandist's main job is to disarm. In the course of disarming, he opens himself to certain dangers. He cannot draw a distinct line because if he did, he would not be able to advance into outlying areas. The organizer must cancel off these other dangers. After getting these people into your party, you can give them a more accurate sense of what you are aiming at. But in the first stage, the propagandist must use certain terms which have a certain ambiguity and which for that very reason give him entrance into other areas."
gather, then maybe they could accelerate what had to happen anyway—the destruction of capitalism and the creation of a workers' government. In his "Call for an American Writers' Congress" in the New Masses of January 22, 1935, Granville Hicks characterized the radical writer as one who did not "need to be convinced of the decay of capitalism, of the inevitability of revolution." Hicks's radical was a writer committed in every sense. Enter, into this scene of left-wing confidence, Kenneth Burke.

Burke remembers leaving the convention and overhearing one woman saying to another: "yet he looked so honest." He remembers Joseph Freeman, one of the moving forces of the congress, standing up and saying, "We have a traitor among us!" There is no record of Freeman's remark in the edited transcript of the discussion that was appended to the published proceedings of the congress; a remark does survive linking Burke's thought to Hitler's. However hysterical and inaccurate, however fictive or real these statements—those in print, those in Burke's memory—these reactions to Burke form one of the incontrovertible signs of the social effect of his critical writing and a hint that when Burke speaks the issues of the text involve a great deal more than pleasure.

The discourse that produced these startling effects on the official left of the 1930s was cunningly entitled "Revolutionary Symbolism in America." In those years of Marxist history (Gramsci was Mussolini's dying prisoner in 1935), Burke's speech had the disconcerting feel of ideological deviance. Revolutionary symbolism? That is to confuse mere superstructural effect with the directive forces at the base, the economic motor principle of revolution. In America? That is to put on the blinders of nationalism which will prevent us from seeing the real world historical dimension of revolution. Was Burke forgetting one of the key Hegelian points of Marx's theory of history: that the process moves inexorably from the local to the global? To stand with the intellectual left in the United States in the early 1930s was to stand in a place where Burke's kind of Marxism could be received only as heresy—as the very discoursé of excrement.

Burke opens his essay by reminding his radical audience that principles of collectivity, whatever their genetic relation to a society's mode of production, do not themselves possess "primary reality" from a "strictly materialistic point of view" (see above, p. 267). In effect what he does in the essay as a whole is to rewrite and elaborate Marx's immensely suggestive first thesis on Feuerbach, which was itself a dialectical rewriting of materialism as it had been hitherto understood: the thing, reality, sensuousness, must not be conceived, Marx argued, as an object exterior (and opposed) to practice, to intellection, to subjectivity, but as "sensuous human activity, practice," with "practice" now understood as an integrated and indivisible whole of physical, intellectual, and emotional coordinates. Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach may stand as a proleptic warning to all economist and mechanistic reductions of historical materialism to the mere materialism that would be performed in his name. The central paralyzing conflict in the history of Marxism may be located in its repetitious, even compulsive staging of that agon. With hindsight, we can see Burke's participation at the first American Writers' Congress in such an intellectual theater, with Burke enacting the father's role of historical materialist and his hostile respondents playing the parts of purists, sons anxious to purge all idealistic and therefore, of course, all fascist misappropriations of the master's word. By "strictly materialistic point of view" Burke refers not, I believe, to the doctrine of historical materialism but to the historically conventional materialism of determinist character that Marx regarded as less intelligent than all-out idealism.

Although I think Burke one of the really superior readers of Marx and would place him among the group Perry Anderson called the "Western Marxists" (Anderson himself did not), it is not my purpose to suggest that Burke, not his respondents, best understood Marx. That sort of reading of the American Writers' Congress would only repeat and enforce another of the hopelessly infertile and claustrophobic dialogues within Marxism: "What did Marx really say, and who among us is the most faithful to his sacred books?" It appears to me that Burke's trouble with thirties Marxists in the United States stems from his deviant understanding of Marx—and by "deviant" I mean that Burke was doing something like New Left analysis within the anti-intellectualist, Second International intellectual context of the old left. One of his most significant contributions to Marxist theory (beyond his lonely American performance of "Western Marxism") is his pressing of the difficult, sliding notion of ideology, bequeathed to us by the The German Ideology, out of the areas of intellectual trickery and false consciousness and into the politically productive textual realms of practical consciousness—rhetoric, the literary, and the media of what he tellingly called "adult education in America." The political work of the hegemonic, as well as that of a would-be counter-hegemonic culture, Burke saw (as Marx did not) as most effectively carried through at the level of a culture's various verbal and nonverbal languages. In 1935 Burke was saying to America's radical left not only that a potentially revolutionary culture should keep in mind that revolution must be culturally as well as economically rooted, but, as well,
and this was perhaps the most difficult of Burke's implications for his radical critics to swallow, that a revolutionary culture must situate itself firmly on the terrain of its capitalist antagonist, must not attempt a dramatic leap beyond capitalism in one explosive, rupturing moment of release, must work its way through capitalism's language of domination by working cunningly within it, using, appropriating, even speaking through its key mechanisms of repression. What Burke's proposal in 1935 to America's intellectual left amounts to is this: the substance, the very ontology of ideology—an issue that Marx and Engels engaged with little clarity, to put it charitably—in a broad but fundamental sense is revealed to us textually and therefore must be grasped (read) and attacked (reread, rewritten) in that dimension.

Burke concentrates therefore on the linguistic instruments which produce our sense of community, the "symbols" of "communal relationship by which a group is bound," the "myth" of the collective that is the "social tool for welding the sense of interrelationship." Collective coherence is no psychic reflex of the economy but the effect of an active, fusing work of cultural production that organizes social cooperation—it is a "tool" that "welds"—by disseminating those myths and symbols, stories and words, which constitute our sense of ourselves in America as part of a social whole presumably ministering justly and equitably to its cooperative, individual subjects (see above, p. 267). The primary lure of all myths of collectivity is that they ask people to yield to what Burke thinks a wholesome human tendency: the desire to give ourselves to something beyond our isolate individual existences. But, he quickly qualifies, and we can provide our own examples of the danger, "the mere fact that the tendency is wholesome is no guaranty that the people will not suffer for their wholesomeness" (see above, p. 268). As a radical American intellectual, with a keen awareness of the liberal American political discourse of justice, equality, and liberty, Burke says in so many words to the literary left gathered in convention that an alternative discourse of justice, a socialist discourse of equality and liberty, if it is successfully to supplant (uproot, plow under) the reigning hegemonic discourse of traditional America—if the socialist cause in America is to triumph, it will have to move inside and infiltrate the duplicitous but powerfully entrenched language of liberty to which we in the "land of the free" have already given allegiance. Burke's wager in 1935—and it is too soon to say that time has proved him wrong—was that the adhesive force of bourgeois nationalist symbols of allegiance was entering a state of decay, that other symbolic agencies were competing to take their place: that, indeed, this very situation of fluidity signified an unstable or rev-
the unconvinced, the proletarian novel took no risk of real dialogue. As intellectuals, proletarian writers and other Marxists, insofar as they are going to have a chance of disseminating doctrine, will have to move inward into examination of the rhetorical grounds of the dissemination of faith and simultaneously outward into critical scrutiny of the rhetorical structure of the dominant hegemony that inhibits the creation of new allegiances.

We can understand the hostility of American literary radicals to Burke's speech if we contextualize their feelings within the dramatic opposition that literary Marxists and formalists historically have tended to enact: Burke was asking his radical auditors to resist thinking of social doctrine as separable from its medium of dissemination. He was telling them that right social action, for a literary intellectual, was preeminently a literary act, because it was grounded in, its effectiveness proceeded from, the rhetorical textures, strategies, and structures of discourse. The left intellectual represented, say, by Edmund Wilson had trouble making an integral, internal connection between radical social vision and literary discourse. Cleanth Brooks, Wilson's thirties contrary, knew that and criticized Wilson on that score. But Brooks could never see anything specifically political, left or right, in his formalist conception of the literary. The distinction and—to the old left—the anomaly of Burke's mind was that it refused both sides of this controversy; Burke simply negated and at the same time preserved the Marxist/formalist controversy in a dialectical maneuver that insisted that the literary was always a form of social action, however rarely it might be recognized as such.

Burke moves from this general point about literary action to the central social commitment of Marxism, the working class itself. Taking a huge chance with this most sensitive of all Marxist sentiments, he asks the intellectual left to consider the worker at the symbolic—not the existential—level, as the embodiment of an ideal, and then to weigh the rhetorical value of that symbol in its American setting, and to measure the extent to which that symbol is persuasively forceful, whether it disseminates revolution or perhaps something else, perhaps reaction. In effect Burke asks Marxists—and the real value of his question is that it is not limited to that audience—whether or not it is their ambition to become workers: "There are few people who really want to work, let us say, as a human cog in an automobile factory, or as gatherers of vegetables on a big truck farm. Such rigorous ways of life enlist our sympathies, but not our ambitions. Our ideal is as far as possible to eliminate such kinds of work, or to reduce its strenuousness to a minimum" (see above, p. 269). Burke's nice point needs a little filling out: you can't expect, he says, in effect, to his progressive friends,

on the one hand, to keep painting these riveting portraits of workers under capitalism, of degradation and alienation—you can't expect people to accept these portraits as the truth, which is your rhetorical desire, after all, and then, on the other hand, at the same time, expect people to want to identify with workers, or become workers, or even enlist their energies of intellect and feeling on behalf of workers. Even though your intention may be otherwise, the fact is that your representations of workers are being received as representations of "the other." Such portraits, when they do enlist our sympathies, often, at the same time, in ways too subtle to trace, create an effect of repulsion—which is always, after all, the effect of "the other" when perceived from inside the self-rationalizing norm. You must therefore attend to the machinery of representation; you must as Marx would urge, rethink your representations of workers. You must somehow bring them within, make sure that their fate and ours are bound up with each other. In cultural struggle, we try to seize the means of representation—rhetorical strategies and the media of their dissemination—and though this act is not equivalent to the seizing of the means of production, if we are successful the quixotic action generally involved in the latter will be unnecessary.

If Burke could have cited The German Ideology in 1935—possible, but not likely—and if in addition he had known Jacques Derrida's Nietzschean critique of representation—likely, but not possible—he would have quoted the following sentences which crystallize (besides a Foucault's message. Burke might have said to his audience: consider, in what I am about to quote, the surprising meanings of the words represent and representative, universal and rational; notice how these words, so epistemologically safe in their traditional setting, so isolated from the world of struggle, in their rationalist purity, are here involved as ideological weapons in the work of historical process and class warfare.

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones. The class making a revolution appears from the very start, if only because it is opposed to a class, not as a class but as the representative of the whole of society; it appears as the whole mass of society confronting the one ruling class.
The embarrassing irony that Burke implicitly extracts from his analysis of the rhetorical effort of Marxism on behalf of the working class is that Marxist rhetoric emerges as reinforcement rather than as subversion of the hegemonic work of advanced capitalist society. "Some people," he says, and I take him—given his audience—to be referring to a certain type of left intellectual, "living overly sedentary lives, may like to read of harsh physical activity (as they once enjoyed Wild West fiction)—but Hollywood knows only too well that the people engaged in such kinds of effort are vitalized mainly by some vague hope that they may some day escape it" (see above, p. 269). Marxist rhetoric, in its effort to set in motion a counter-hegemony, must among other things project an image of a dehumanized and impoverished working class; the image is not rejected but welcomed by the intellectual forgers of the dominant hegemony who turn it against revolutionary intention. "Adult education" in capitalist America," Burke writes, "to-day is centered in the efforts of our economic mercenaries (our advertising men and sales organizations) to create a maximum desire for commodities consumed under expensive conditions—and Hollywood appeals to the worker mainly by picturing the qualities of life in which this commercially stimulated desire is gratified" (see above p. 269).

The intention of what he calls adult education in America is to train or, in Foucault's sense, to discipline desire in the working class, to move it within a normalizing and self-perpetuating structure of desire promoted by an economic system that knows how to protect itself and, in this way, to move desire away from realizing one of its disruptive implications: the structural transformation of society and its socialist re-definition. Instead of foregrounding and pressing one of the potentially fatal internal contradictions of consumer capitalism, which would move it dialectically against itself (consumer capitalism must, through its manipulation of discourse and the image, "commercially stimulate" a desire for the good life whose social and economic historical ground cannot be capitalist society), Marxist rhetoric instead falls unwittingly into the hands of the artists and intellectuals of Madison Avenue and Hollywood and thereby helps to extend the historical life of consumer capitalism.

The "desire" that I refer to is not the ontological sort, the historically unlocated "lack" that Sartre defined in Being and Nothingness: it is, rather, that utopian yearning generated on the ground of capitalist economy itself, a yearning triggered by the message to the "free" laborer that, unlike his ancestor in the medieval system, he has unlimited social and economic fluidity—the message, to stay with my metaphor a moment longer, of "fluidity" itself. Especially in its demo-
the production of both desire for the commodity and the illusion of potential gratification, a quality of happiness transcending commodities, though mediated by them, then proletarian fiction may unfortunately be one of the conditions of such production. The deep message of adult education in America is that the economic desire of workers can be required only within a capitalist economy, undergirded and forever reinforced by its production of commodity-desire which, as Burke's reference to Hollywood's dream factory would suggest, well in advance of Guy Debord and Christopher Lasch, is synonymous with the production of the image. As critical theorist of social change, speaking to the intellectual vanguard of social change, Burke poses this question: "Is the symbol of the worker accurately attuned to us, as so conditioned by the reactionary forces in control of our main educational channels?" (see above, p. 269).

His response is no. But by answering in the negative Burke was not taking sides against Marx's historical wager on proletarian revolution; what he was denying, rather, was the rhetorico-symbolic value of the "worker," in discourses putatively aimed at changing minds for revolutionary ends, within an American social and political context in which class consciousness has been more or less successfully repressed. From the American point of view, the rhetorico-symbolic weight of the "worker" is burdened with an irrelevant historicity that is put into play every time the word is uttered, for it tends to carry with it an attendant rhetoric, decidedly foreign to our ways—proletariat, bourgeoisie, ruling class: the stuff of the European experience, but surely not of ours. Thus, along with the other disadvantages that Burke has noted, we have to add that all talk of a working class in America, or even just of class, and certainly of the complex awareness of hierarchical economic relations called class-consciousness, tends to sound forced, which is not to say that the experience of workers is a fantasy of Marxist intellectuals, or that the economic interests of a few do not require the exploitation of many. To say all of this against a Marx's historical wager on proletarian revolution; what he was denying, rather, was the rhetorico-symbolic value of the "worker," in discourses putatively aimed at changing minds for revolutionary ends, within an American social and political context in which class consciousness has been more or less successfully repressed. From the American point of view, the rhetorico-symbolic weight of the "worker" is burdened with an irrelevant historicity that is put into play every time the word is uttered, for it tends to carry with it an attendant rhetoric, decidedly foreign to our ways—proletariat, bourgeoisie, ruling class: the stuff of the European experience, but surely not of ours. Thus, along with the other disadvantages that Burke has noted, we have to add that all talk of a working class in America, or even just of class, and certainly of the complex awareness of hierarchical economic relations called class-consciousness, tends to sound forced, which is not to say that the experience of workers is a fantasy of Marxist intellectuals, or that the economic interests of a few do not require the exploitation of many. To say all of this against a

If it hopes to get its political work done in the United States, a Marxist rhetoric must take pains not to rupture itself from the historico-rhetorical mainstream of American social and political values. A truly fragmenting, not a unifying effect. The tragic effect of a traditional Marxist rhetoric in the American scene might be this: instead of extending (spreading, disseminating, propagating) a doctrine of revolutionary thought, a discourse weighted with symbols of proletarian life and exploitation might succeed only in isolating—I mean "quarantining"—workers' agony. Having thus inadvertently segregated workers from the social whole—irony of ironies for a totalizing philosophy—Marxist rhetoric then inadvertently plays into the purposes of the reactionary rhetoric poured out through our main educational channels where the worker is bombarded by images of the "good life," translated as maximum commodities consumed under expensive conditions. Maybe the bitterest of ironies to emerge from this conflict of rhetorics is not the quarantining effect of Marxist doctrine but the internal self-revulsion of workers as individuals and as members of an exploited group.

In suggesting that the American Marxist intellectual discard the symbol of the worker as rhetorical sine qua non of a vanguard movement, Burke by no means suggests that the real human costs extracted from workers be ignored or even downplayed: "The rigors of the worker must certainly continue to form a major part of revolutionary symbolism, if only for the reason that here the worst features of capitalist exploitation are concentrated" (see above, p. 269). Burke is here urging that the rigors of the worker be inserted within a rhetorically more encompassing ("representative") symbol, so that the fate of the working class will be organically integrated with the fate of society as a whole: a vision of totality, undergirded by the working class, must be produced by a rhetoric of totality. The role of such rhetoric is not the persuasion of doubters that "there is" totality but the creation and in-semination of a vision—we may say a heuristic fiction—whose promised child is consenting consciousness for radical social change. More specifically, what this counter-hegemonic effort entails is the choice of a central symbolism that would permit the vanguard intellectual to move with some hope for success into those very areas of society not disposed to think that the first order of American social business is structural change. Burke's suggestion, what created all the outrage and brought down on his head charges that he was a dupe of fascism who naively employed the rhetorical methods of Hitler, is that American Marxists choose in place of "the worker" the symbol of "the people" (see above, p. 269).

If it hopes to get its political work done in the United States, a Marxist rhetoric must take pains not to rupture itself from the historico-rhetorical mainstream of American social and political values. A truly
raptured rhetoric on behalf of the working class, standing in moral purity and isolation from the evils of all other political discourses, would not succeed in bringing the new society to birth ex nihilo but would only cut itself off from potentially sympathetic reception as it created not dialogue but narcissistic reflection. A radical rhetoric of revolution, instead of attempting to transcend the historical terrain of repression, should—one appeal to etymology here—work at the radical, within the history it would remake “at the root.” The way out, if there is a way out, can only be the way through. Hence Burke’s plea that “one cannot extend the doctrine of revolutionary thought among the lower middle class without using middle-class values—just as the Church invariably converted pagans by making the local deities into saints” (see above, p. 269). Burke’s appeal to Marxists to immerse their rhetoric of revolution in the historical and cultural specificity of American folkways, to sink deeper into history, not to try to leap beyond it, though angrily rejected by his auditors at the American Writers’ Congress, is primarily, I believe, a profound appeal to dialectics. Not dialectics as the theory of the gross institutional movement of social and economic history that Marx and Engels had outlined in *The German Ideology* but dialectics as a theory of the discursive movement of social and political history, dialectics as the theory of the emergent process of a liberating discourse—a dialectical rhetoric, not a simple negating language of rupture but a shrewd, self-conscious rhetoric that conserves as it negates. To a group presumably committed to the idea that revolution is made at the level of mind, and only executed, if at all, at the level of armed bodies, Burke is saying: get yourself a dialectical rhetoric and fashion it out of the stuff of the history and culture in which you find yourselves; in this way you will have the chance to be understood, clearly understood. That, to speak anachronistically, is the heart of Burke’s Gramscian message—his appropriation of those decidedly non-teleological moments in the history of history embodied in *The German Ideology*.

As dialectical rhetorician, the revolutionary writer must seize the historically persistent bourgeois rhetoric, somehow unmask its structure of oppression while preserving its emergent utopian intention. In America this means the appropriation, in the symbol of “the people,” of a unifying direction, a latent ideal of society, “the ultimate classless feature which the revolution would bring about” (see above, p. 270). At the same moment, such appropriation must be a revelation of the frightening nationalistic and class prerogatives which hide their abusive force “behind a communal ideology.” The ultimate point of such rhetoric is to create a new social center, aligned with the working class by its intellectuals—a critical mass galvanized into active “sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy towards our oppressive institutions” (see above, p. 270).

“The people” must be understood as an ideological element within an ideological system whose palpable, hegemonic form is linguistic. Burke is saying in effect that the discourse this element inhabits is not reducible to the interests of a specific class; nor, I would add, is it an epiphenomenon of the economic infrastructure of society. As an isolable element in the discourse, “the people,” as a later critical theory would have it, is fundamentally “undecidable,” at the same time, from the systemic or ideological point of view, any ideological element necessarily plays a functionally determinate role. Burke in his address was saying that the literary seizing of the time involved, among other things, taking advantage of such latent undecidability by first extracting “the people” from its bourgeois nationalist system and then placing it onto a very different ideological terrain, one that it was not accustomed to occupying, where it could do the sort of very decidable work that the orthodox left then thought unimaginable. The function of the critical literary intellectual, Burke is arguing, is to engage in ideological struggle at the discursive level; to absorb and then rearticulate “the people” with a new organic ideology, where it might serve a different collective will. The fluidity, or undecidability, of the symbol is not, therefore, the sign of its social and political elusiveness but the ground of its historicity and of its flexible but also specific political significance and force.

Enabling this dialectical or historical work of rhetoric (the work of “argument”) is one of the traditional resources of the rhetorician: the tropes, now manipulated not for ornamental purposes but for the ends of social change. The tropes must carry the argument of Marxism, which cannot be made “literally and directly” but only by the “intellectual company” it keeps. Literally and directly, the deployment of the general Marxist argument in the United States is subject to the same limitations that enervated the proletarian symbol—it appears foreign, disruptive to our culture’s “unity” and “stability,” an intruder into the “organic” social body. The revolutionary argument must be made implicitly, must be made to emerge as a necessary expression of our historical drift as a nation. Burke is urging a distinction between the work of the intellectual in his pamphleteering role, or in his role as political organizer—such work, in other words, that is explicit in its commitments—and the work of the intellectual as “imaginative” writer whose political contribution must be implicit. This distinction entails an unspoken judgment: Burke is betting that the writer’s im-
plied political alignment will ultimately do more effective political work because its literary-rhetorical matrix will make the force of radical vision difficult to resist (see above, pp. 270-71).

I think Burke is anticipating his later work on the connection between political authority and the tropes, the matter of "representation" in both its political and aesthetic meanings. The political, he is saying in so many words, must be embedded as a kind of synecdoche—as part of a larger cultural whole from which it cannot be extricated without violating the character of the whole, without also carrying out all the desirable features of the whole associated with it by necessity. That is the textual magic of synecdoche, and that is what Burke is getting at when he says that one's political alignment must be "fused" with "broader" cultural elements. To "represent" the larger cultural whole as fused with a radical political alignment that functions as a synecdoche, a "representation" of the whole itself, is to naturalize the political, make it seem irresistible. This is the work of rhetoric, and rhetoric, like theory, as Burke knows, is not necessarily in the service of radical change.

Let me draw out the implication: the radical mind has no privileged mode of persuasion available to it; there is no morally pure, no epistemologically secure, no linguistically uncontaminated route to radical change. Thus Burke's chief example of implicit poetic strategy: "this is what our advertisers do when they recommend a particular brand of cigarette by picturing it as being smoked under desirable conditions; it is the way in which the best artists of the religious era recommended or glorified their faith; and I imagine it would be the best way of proceeding today" (see above, p. 271). To attempt to proceed in purity—to reject the rhetorical strategies of capitalism and Christianity, as if such strategies were in themselves responsible for human oppression—to proceed with the illusion of purity is to situate oneself on the margin of history, as the possessor of a unique truth disengaged from history's flow. It is to exclude oneself from having any chance of making a difference for better or for worse.

The traditional humanist response to all of this is not difficult to imagine: Isn't what you and Burke call Marxism at bottom, then, sheer and brutal Nietzschean will to power? Are you not saying that the end justifies the means? What, therefore, makes you think that your theory will not do to others what you say other theories have done? I used to think those questions powerfully sobering; I now think they are merely frightened, for they imply individually and collectively a desire for a transcendental guarantee that action in this world can proceed in innocence, with no harm done on any side—a desire, in other words, to know in advance that what we do can produce only good. Of course those who pose such questions know better—that is why they do nothing, and in such quietude assume that they do no harm. The means of rhetoric, in fact, are neither good nor bad: they simply are.

The intellectual who would be self-consciously socially effective can but proceed, then, in the hegemonic mode, creating consensus. Consensus cannot be created by the purist stance of "antithetical morality," and that is what is at stake in Burke's suggestion that the symbol of the worker be replaced by an encompassing symbolism whose rhetorical force will be located on the common ground, the kindred values it "finds," by sleight of hand, for writer and audience, for only within such a rhetorical relation, so structured by commonality of value and purpose, is the reception of radical values possible. Here is Burke on the rhetorical conditions of propagation:

Dialectics as rhetoric, as art of ingratiation—as "propaganda by inclusion": the creation, in a revolutionary era, when symbols of allegiance are being exchanged, of a revolutionary symbolism (see above, p. 272). "Revolutionary" means fundamentally for Burke "transitional"—the state, both historically and psychologically, of being "between" and, fiction of all radical fictions, the state of "tendency," of being "on the way." It is not a question of whether there is a teleology in history—a question for metaphysicians and some Marxists—but a question of forging the rhetorical conditions for change, a question of forging (and I'll insist on the Joycean resonance of that term) a teleological rhetoric, of creating, through the mediations of such discourse, a collective will for change, for moving history in the direction of our desire. We need a rhetoric, Burke concludes, that creates a psychological bridge, a
Janus-faced language; “looking both forwards and back” it establishes—forges—its historicity, its continuity as the inevitable, emergent language—fiction of tendency—and by so doing becomes as well the Janus-faced psychological bridge that carries “the people” smoothly, without break, from bourgeois democratic location to the state of socialism (see above, pp. 272-73). This political symbolism becomes effective when it is surrounded by the fullest of cultural textures—when one’s political alignment is associated with “cultural awareness in the large” (see above, p. 273). At such a moment, the war for cultural position will have been won and the hegemony in place, replaced.

One of the chapters of a full-scale history of Marxist thought will have to be on Kenneth Burke who, among other things, was doing Gramsci’s work before anyone but Gramsci (and his censors) could read what would be called the *Prison Notebooks*. The real force of Burke is not limited, however, to his historically independent Gramscian practice or to his American discovery of the popular front. The real force of his thinking is to lay bare, more candidly than any writer I know who works in theory, the socially and politically enmeshed character of the intellectual. To put it that way is to say that Burke more even than Gramsci carries through the project on intellectuals implied by parts of *The German Ideology*. And Burke did this not just occasionally but repeatedly over a career that has spanned more than sixty years.

**NOTES**

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.