Donald Lazere

**Reaffirming Critical Composition Studies as an Antidote to Trumpian Authoritarianism**

Public discussion of “the authoritarian personality” returned with the election of President Trump. This article traces the rise of that concept and broader study of mass society in American social science, with adaptations into composition studies from the 1960s to the 1990s—followed by their lamentable eclipse under a lethal combination of forces since then.

Whereas, to address the changing political and media climates, we believe it is time to modify and extend NCTE’s previous and continuing commitments, as defined in a 1971 NCTE resolution:

That the National Council of Teachers of English find means to study the relation of language to public policy, to keep track of, publicize, and combat semantic distortion by public officials, candidates for office, political commentators, and all those who transmit through the mass media . . .

Be it therefore

Resolved that the National Council of Teachers of English

- promote pedagogy and scholarly curricula in English and related subjects that instruct students in civic and critical literacy

**CCC 71:2 / DECEMBER 2019**

296
Among the many ruptures that Donald Trump’s election as president provoked in recent American political and cultural assumptions was the sudden reappearance in both news media and scholarship of long-neglected phrases such as authoritarianism and right-wing populism. In the flood of media references to Trump and authoritarianism, some used the term strictly as an autocratic form of government, but many invoked an academic body of sociology, social/developmental psychology, and cultural critique that linked an authoritarian personality type with the right-wing populism and glorification of patriarchy that Trump championed. Typical was a column by political scientist Thomas Edsall in the New York Times of 28 September 2017, “The Trump Voter Paradox.” Edsall drew from several recent scholarly studies with titles such as Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics with citations such as “Voters who supported [Trump] ‘score high on authority/loyalty/sanctity, and low on care.’” They are “the true authoritarians, they value obedience while scoring low on compassion.”

A frequent variant on this theme was voiced in the Atlantic shortly after Trump’s election: “The 2016 campaign produced the unthinkable: the election of a presidential candidate whom members of his own party described as a classic authoritarian. . . . Public schools are failing at what the nation’s founders saw as education’s most basic purpose: preparing young people to be reflective citizens who would value liberty and democracy and resist the appeals of demagogues. In that sense, the Trump phenomenon should be a Sputnik moment for civics education” (Kahlenberg and Janey). (Also see Derek Bok, “The Crisis of Civic Education” and other articles in a Trump-keyed issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education Review on “Teaching the Idea of America,” 6 October 2017.)

- support classroom practices that examine and question uses of language in order to discern inhumane, misinformative, or dishonest discourse and arguments. ("Resolution on English Education for Critical Literacy in Politics and Media," March 6, 2019)
In this article, I trace the rise of studies of authoritarianism and related subjects in American social science, followed by their adaptations into composition and other English studies, from about the 1950s to the early 1990s—followed by their eclipse under a lethal combination of forces since then. (I use composition as shorthand for composition and rhetoric, aka “rhetcomp.”) I have long advocated a central role in composition courses, and in scholarly publication, for study of argumentative reasoning and rhetoric, that is, critical thinking—with central focus on the stockpile of propaganda and logical fallacies to which politicians and corporate hucksters resort. This emphasis in turn provides a framework for leftist critical pedagogy and cultural studies, which I believe still constitute a salient counterforce to authoritarian psychology, politics, and mass culture. In conclusion, I affirm the urgent need for reinvigorating these studies in the Trumpian age—in the face of opposition from both the political right, mainly through budgetary starvation, and from the aftermath of recent decades of progressive populism, postmodern pluralism, and localism within our own discipline. I argue that although these and more recent tendencies in composition study such as social-justice activism have had much intrinsic value, many have excluded or even denigrated the kind of pedagogy I defend, thereby vacating a prime educational site for opposing Trumpian authoritarianism. Worse yet, many populist-pluralists have failed to delineate their theories in a way that would guard against their being turned against them by conservatives—in what I call right-wing deconstruction.

This article extends, for the Trumpian age, my theoretical views in Political Literacy in Composition and Rhetoric (2015). The model for the composition curriculum and pedagogy I invoke only briefly here is based on the 1970s NCTE resolutions on civic literacy and on the body of work by colleagues surveyed below in “From Frankfurt to 1960s Protest and Critical Pedagogy.” My own applications have been amply developed in articles including “Teaching the Political Conflicts,” “Teaching the Conflicts about Wealth and Poverty,” and “A Core Curriculum for Civic Literacy,” as well as the textbooks Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy (Lazere and Womack) and Thinking Critically about Media and Politics. It would be

Many populist-pluralists have failed to delineate their theories in a way that would guard against their being turned against them by conservatives—in what I call right-wing deconstruction.
both distracting and redundant to recapitulate my own or others’ works in detail here. I attempt instead to develop a single, extended line of argument, tracing the rise and fall of criticism of authoritarianism in mass society and culture in the past half century of composition studies. This necessitates eliding full support for some points, in which cases I refer readers to passages in *Political Literacy* and my textbooks. (For example, *Political Literacy* includes extensive rebuttals of American versions, often vulgarized, of anti-rationalistic, poststructuralist/postmodernist theories purporting to deconstruct all empirically based social science studies such as those I reaffirm here. While some pomo (postmodern) theories usefully demonstrated flaws in such studies, along the same lines as mine here, their consequence has often been an inductive leap to rejecting them all a priori rather than refining and reaffirming what remains valid in them as I do.) I only present these arguments as an invitation, or provocation, for colleagues to revive study and debate on these complex issues that have been largely ignored in the last few decades.

**The Authoritarian Personality in Historical Context**

In the history of postwar scholarship in the United States on the concepts surveyed here, the master trope is “the authoritarian personality,” both as the title of a keystone book and as a signifier for a large gestalt of related topics. *The Authoritarian Personality* was published in 1950. Its lead author was Theodor Adorno, in collaboration with Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson, and B. Nevitt Sanford, sociologists at Berkeley. Adorno was prominent among the German American intellectual Marxists of the Frankfurt School, who also included Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Leo Lowenthal, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Wilhelm Reich, followed by Jürgen Habermas in the next generation. Lowenthal, another member of the Berkeley sociology department, through the 1970s, wrote *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society*, which remains a definitive survey of the Frankfurt School’s interdisciplinary scope. Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the editing of Benjamin’s posthumous *Illuminations*, was also related to the Frankfurt School, more through affinity than direct collaboration.

The basis for the “Critical Theory” of the Frankfurt School refugees from Nazi Germany was the tendencies they witnessed in American political economy and mass culture that were comparable to those
that had led to fascist authoritarianism and totalitarianism in Europe. Corollary themes in their works, and that of kindred scholars, included, in Adorno et al.’s term, “the culture industry,” with its corporate engineering of conformity and what sociolinguist Basil Bernstein termed “restricted codes” in individual language and thought but also in mass media’s stereotypes, repetitious formulas, oversimplification, “spectacle,” and commodity fetishism. These themes were delineated in works such as Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* in 1941, Reich’s *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (in German 1933, translated here in 1970), Adorno’s prescient “Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture” in 1957, and Marcuse’s chapter “The Closing of the Universe of Discourse” in *One Dimensional Man* in 1964, describing “the totally administered society.” Other Frankfurt subjects of study, derived from Marx, included intentional or unintentional reflections of class power relations, false consciousness and mystification, progressive and regressive tendencies, politico-economic hegemony and its ideological reproduction in high and popular culture and education as well as workplace and family socialization, and in specific “situations,” “sites,” or “moments” past and present. Marcuse, the most prominent member by the 1960s, when he became a guru of the American New Left and a corrosive critic of the Vietnam War, provided perhaps the most concise summary of the school’s thought in “Repressive Tolerance” (1969), denouncing “the systematic moronization of children and adults alike by publicity and propaganda” (Wolf 83). Other postwar American and European social scientists and intellectual journalists pursued similar lines of thought, focusing on the proto-totalitarianism in mass politics, culture, and corporate society, with their attendant apparatuses of social control, hidden persuaders, anti-intellectualism, infantilization, and alienation in work, education, and consumerism.

Two prominent literary works in that period dramatizing similar themes were Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* in 1932 and George Orwell’s *1984* in 1949. In fact, Trump’s candidacy and election prompted an extraordinary revival of attention to both of these novels, with *1984* surging to the bestseller lists, and debates about which novel more accurately foreshadowed Trump’s “newspeak.” In *1984* the masses were impoverished and brainwashed by the “doublethink” propaganda of a totalitarian dictatorship. In *Brave New World* they were stupefied by nonstop fun, games, sex, and drugs, with the rulers just giving the people what they want in a
consumer society: to remain blissfully ignorant. Huxley later acknowledged, in the 1960 collection of essays *Brave New World Revisited*, that his novel’s depiction of ruling elites’ selfless benevolence was ingenuous. Turning to postwar Western society in chapters such as “Propaganda in a Democratic Society,” he observed:

> Under a [fascist or communist] dictatorship the Big Business, made possible by advancing technology and the consequent ruin of Little Business, is controlled by the State. ... In a capitalist democracy, such as the United States, it is controlled by what Professor C. Wright Mills has called the Power Elite. This Power Elite directly employs several millions of the country’s working force in its factories, offices, and stores, controls many millions more by lending them the money to buy its products, and, through its ownership of the media of mass communication, influences the thoughts, the feelings, and the actions of virtually everyone. (252)

Huxley continued:

> Non-stop distractions . . . are deliberately used for the purpose of preventing people from paying too much attention to the realities of the social and political situation. . . . A society, most of whose members spend a great part of the time, not on the spot, not here and now and in the calculable future, but somewhere else, in the irrelevant other worlds of sport and soap opera, of mythology and metaphysical fantasy, will find it hard to resist the encroachments of those who would manipulate it. (267–68)

In his concluding chapter, “Education for Freedom,” Huxley’s prescriptions included this statement: “The effects of false and pernicious propaganda cannot be neutralized except by a thorough training in the art of analyzing its techniques and seeing through its sophistries” (328).

Returning to *The Authoritarian Personality* within this broader context, it was an effort to support Frankfurt critical theory with social-scientific research, based on questionnaires surveying Americans on their social attitudes in relation to an “F-scale,” or inclination toward fascism. This met with criticism on several grounds. Its methodology was shaky and tendentious. Like many other prominent postwar works by liberal or
leftist social scientists and psychologists, it was intended as a critique of proto-fascistic social control of the masses and class hierarchies imposed by capitalist elites, but it was stood on its head by conservative intellectuals, through “blaming the victim”—poor people, especially minorities, whose alleged cognitive/cultural deficits made liberal programs such as welfare or wider access to quality public education futile. The same misconceptions have continued to be commonplaces of Republican polemics to the present and have often prejudiced progressive scholars, including in composition, against the Frankfurt School and kindred critics such as Bernstein and Huxley.

Another weakness in *The Authoritarian Personality* was its vagueness in relating authoritarianism to social class. This reflected the Frankfurt Marxists’ disillusionment with their faith in the working class as the basis for socialist revolution, after they witnessed the masses in Germany succumb to Nazi appeals to populism. So this study associated authoritarianism with right-wing populism but was vague on the class identity of its subjects, thus provoking criticism from leftists that the study also tacitly denigrated working-class, progressive populism (such as that of labor unions and the incipient civil rights movement). Some social scientists at the time were more precise about class. *Political Man* by Seymour Martin Lipset, yet another prominent Berkeley sociologist, featured a chapter titled “Working Class Authoritarianism”; however, Lipset actually linked authoritarianism, in both Nazi Germany and the United States, more to the lower middle class:

> The groups that have been most prone to support fascist and other middle-class extremist ideologies have been, in addition to farmers and peasants, the small businessmen of the small provincial communities—groups which are also isolated from “cosmopolitan” culture and are far lower than any non-manual labor group in educational attainment. (105). (Similarly, in Trump’s circle, “cosmopolitans” were demonized in contrast to America-Firsters.)

Lipset added, “Rather large sections of [the Republican party] have continued to express the reactionary sentiments of the small-town, provincial middle classes” (271). Lipset also surveyed American left-wing authoritarianism in Communist Party true believers and some doctrinaire labor union members. However, these groups have long virtually disappeared from prominence in America; they can now mainly be seen in the goose-stepping troops of Communist dictatorships such as North Korea.
In the chapter “The Small Business Front” in *White Collar* (1950), sociologist C. Wright Mills, another Marxist mentor of the New Left, wrote:

In any melee between big business and big labor, the small entrepreneurs seem to be more on the side of business. It is as if the closer to bankruptcy they are, the more they cling to their ideal. . . . Small business’s attitude toward government, as toward labor, plays into the hands of big-business ideology. In both connections, small businessmen are shock troops in the battle against labor unions and government controls. (52–53)

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron’s *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (1977) studied, along the same sociolinguistic lines as Bernstein, the authoritarian tendencies reproduced in lower-middle-class vocabulary, syntax and, conceptualization. And in a later version, cultural historian Christopher Lasch, in *The True and Only Heaven* (1991), described the lower middle class (at least as it is regarded by intellectuals in the Marxist tradition, with whom Lasch disagreed): “It resented social classes more highly placed but internalized their standards, lording it over the poor instead of joining them in a common struggle against oppression” (459). In 2000, literary scholar Rita Felski’s “Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class,” in *PMLA* and later in *Doing Time*, and excerpted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, wittily suggested that the reactionary tendency of the LMC (lower middle class) in the United States stemmed in part from its resentment over being the unmarked social norm—with nothing to declare in this age of identity politics.

Don’t all these accounts uncannily foreshadow Trump’s “base,” suggesting that his electoral support may have come as much from the lower middle class as from the rural working class played up by the media? And I would qualify these accounts by speculating, from my life experience, that “lower middle class” is less a precise definition of a socioeconomic segment than a description of attitudes that can be found across various class positions. At the blue-collar level, it is Archie Bunker and Roseanne. At the median level, it corresponds to supposed attributes of “Middle America” and “the silent majority,” and my analysis here suggests that it, rather than the blue-collar class or poor, is the primary target of both American authoritarian politics and mass culture. At upper levels, it corresponds to terms such as “new rich” or “philistine,” along with authoritarian “dominators” discussed below. All of these are constituencies of the Republican Party in general and Trump’s base in particular.
The Frankfurt School and “the authoritarian personality” (concept and book) fell into general public and academic disfavor for several decades, including in composition studies, as discussed below. However, in recent years, they have had a mini-revival. In 2014, the New Yorker featured an article by music critic Alex Ross declaring, “The philosophers, sociologists, and critics in the Frankfurt School orbit, who are often gathered under the broader label of Critical Theory, are, indeed, having a modest resurgence” (88). And in 2017, the New York Review of Books published a laudatory review by legal philosopher Samuel Freeman of three books in recent years on the Frankfurt School, stressing their relevance to Trumpism.

Likewise, recent years have seen many research projects, books, and articles reaffirming the timeliness of The Authoritarian Personality despite its faults. In a 2005 column titled “The ‘Authoritarian Personality’ Revisited” in the Chronicle of Higher Education, political scientist Alan Wolfe wrote about the book, “The fact that the radical right has transformed itself from a marginal movement to an influential sector of the contemporary Republican Party makes the book’s choice of subject matter all the more prescient. Many of the prominent politicians successful in today’s conservative political environment adhere to a distinct style of politics that the authors of The Authoritarian Personality anticipated.”

A more extensive reaffirmation appeared in 2006 in Conservatives without Conscience, by John Dean, notorious as President Nixon’s former White House counsel whose testimony in the Watergate hearings helped bring Nixon down. Dean argued that the Republican Party, beginning with the ruthless circle around Nixon, has harbored many prominent figures with authoritarian traits, such as Nixon “dirty trickster” Roger Stone, who would be reborn as an adviser to Trump and lobbying partner to Paul Manafort. Stone’s mantra was “Admit nothing, deny everything, launch counter-attack” (Toobin). The traits that Dean and his sources, such as Robert Altemeyer’s The Authoritarian Spector, identified with “social dominators” include bellicose, bullying aggression and overreaction to opponents. Dean noted, “They seem to have little facility for self-analysis” and “are not aware of their illogical, contradictory, and hypocritical thinking” (30). And, “Not surprisingly, the very conservatives who love to hurl invective against the ranks of their enemies prove to have the thinnest of skins when the same is done to them” (26). Among the “socially dominated” personality traits are sociocentrism and xenophobia, unquestioning obedience to shows
of strength and “get tough” political leaders, military and police policies, intolerance of ambiguity, and need for certainty or structure in life, as well as a strain of doublethink between an idealized image of their authority figures (“They must know what they’re doing”) and craving for iron-fisted rule, even if it entails corruption and lies: “He’s a crook, but he’s our crook.” In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm diagnosed this relationship in psychiatric terms, as sadistic in the dominators, masochistic in the dominated. Dominators and dominated share the trait of double standards applied to “us” versus “them” in which the latter’s authority figures are assumed *not* to know what they’re doing. (“Tribalism” is the current term of choice for this mentality.)

All these authoritarian traits clearly correlate with patriarchy and are precisely those that are addressed by units on critical thinking in composition courses such as avoiding logical fallacies, ethnocentrism, and primary certitude, while envisioning readers whose viewpoint differs from one’s own and applying “women’s ways of knowing.” Such connections have been made explicitly in composition studies by Patricia Roberts-Miller in journal articles and most recently in her 2017 book *Demagoguery and Democracy*. She was associated with Rhetoricians for Peace (RFP) at a workshop at the 2019 CCCC Annual Convention, as were most of the contributors to *Propaganda and Rhetoric in Democracy*, edited by Gae Lyn Henderson and M. J. Braun. (RFP in 2018 launched a web journal, *The Daily Doublespeak: Analyzing Everyday Propaganda*, and initiated the new NCTE resolution on civic literacy.) Another exemplary addition in 2018 was Dana L. Cloud’s *Reality Bites: Rhetoric and the Circulation of Truth Claims in U.S. Political Culture*. There is, then, ample recent confirmation that the older schools of cultural criticism got as much right as wrong, and that reviving and refining their viewpoint is a worthy enterprise, more than ever in the Age of Trump.

**From Frankfurt to 1960s Protest and Critical Pedagogy**

I confess that my preoccupation with authoritarianism, mass culture, and the lower middle class is rooted in my life story. I grew up LMC in the 1950s, in the midwestern midst of Middle-American conformity. After col-

Among the “socially dominated” personality traits are sociocentrism and xenophobia, . . . as well as a strain of doublethink between an idealized image of their authority figures . . . and craving for iron-fisted rule, even if it entails corruption and lies: “He’s a crook, but he’s our crook.”

**Among the “socially dominated” personality traits are sociocentrism and xenophobia, . . . as well as a strain of doublethink between an idealized image of their authority figures . . . and craving for iron-fisted rule, even if it entails corruption and lies: “He’s a crook, but he’s our crook.”**
lege, I worked in New York for several years in mass media, including as a copywriting trainee at McCann-Erickson advertising agency on Madison Avenue. My boss assigned me to compile a list of possible slogans for a new model of Westinghouse refrigerator, telling me, “There’s really nothing new about this year’s model over the last one, but the average housewife is too stupid to see there’s no difference.” Revulsion against widespread attitudes like that prompted me to move to Berkeley, join the Free Speech Movement, and study for an English doctorate in preparation to teach “average” college students to resist manipulation by the elites of Wall Street, Madison Avenue, Washington, and the Pentagon.

I ended up teaching back in Middle American rural and small-city state colleges, mainly for over twenty years as a professor at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, where I taught mostly second-term and advanced writing, critical thinking, and literature general-education requirements for non-English majors. (My following account is not meant to generalize about all of my students, or even most; however, there were more of them like I describe than is generally admitted to in composition circles, where their demographic has received little scholarly or pedagogical attention.) The students I refer to were predominantly white, Republican, and lower middle class, though some of their parents owned prosperous farms, ranches, or small businesses, as in Lipset’s and Mills’s accounts. As recently as May 2018, the Los Angeles Times published several reports along the lines of “New Blackface Incident at Cal Poly,” about fraternity parties where members masqueraded as stereotypical blacks. The report notes, “Cal Poly is the least diverse of the 23 California State University schools,” with “a higher percentage of white students than all 10 University of California campuses. . . . Less than 1% of students are African American” (Christensen). The largest “minority” there is Asian Americans and foreign students, many of them middle-class high achievers in STEM.

The more conservative students frequently said they resented being required to take any general ed courses outside of their agricultural management or technological majors—an attitude that has become increasingly understandable as the cost of college education has skyrocketed. Many showed resistance against any effort toward critical pedagogy, as in my second-term writing course focused on thinking critically about political rhetoric. They flaunted attitudes that were racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, prejudiced against the poor and in favor of the rich—most
blatantly against the Latino migrant farm workers employed by many of their families. Several revealed they had attended “white academies,” de facto segregated, private K–12 schools. A few actually wrote papers endorsing fascism. (Is that such an outrageous assertion, in light of the recent resurgence of neo-fascist inclinations in America?) Over the years I have maintained a file of the more egregious papers, epitomized by this one written some thirty years ago:

From what we have read in this class, it seems a small handful of corporations are in control of just about everything in America, and it is a good thing. The average one of the masses could hardly run his own life correctly if someone wasn’t looking after him. These corporations are responsible for the economic and social well-being of the nation, hence it is logical to assume that they know what is best.

I always regretted not asking him whether he considered himself one of those destined to look out after the masses or one of those who could hardly run his own life—and in either case, what that indicated about his self-esteem.

Such were the kind of experiences that led me increasingly to embrace Frankfurt School thought, especially as it converged in the 1960s with that of the campus New Left. *The Port Huron Statement*, the 1962 manifesto of Students for a Democratic Society, was mainly written by Tom Hayden, an undergraduate at the University of Michigan. It reflected pacifist and democratic-socialist ideals, as well as protesting against racial injustice and the intensification of the Cold War leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis the same year. But it voiced a broader generational alienation echoing the critics of mass society:

Some would have us believe that Americans feel contentment amidst prosperity—but might it not better be called a glaze above deeply felt anxieties about their role in the new world? And if these anxieties produce a developed indifference to human affairs, do they not as well produce a yearning to believe there is an alternative to the present, that something can be done to change circumstances in the school, the workplaces, the bureaucracies, the government? (Students for a Democratic Society, 330–31).

SDS was active not only in the civil rights movement in the South, but in community organizing through its Economic Research and Action Project in poor neighborhoods in northern cities, following mentors such as Saul
Alinsky and Dorothy Day (see Gitlin 165–70) So I recommend the early SDS and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement as models for current activists to link academic study with community engagement.

The eloquent speeches by twenty-two-year-old Mario Savio in the Free Speech Movement beginning in 1964 built on his activism in the Mississippi Freedom Summer project earlier that year, carried over into protest that fall against UC restrictions on campus recruitment for civil rights activism and against the broader corporate bureaucratizing and dehumanizing of both education and the larger society. Savio was an avid student of modern and classical literature and oratory, whose speeches alluded to Thoreau (“Civil Disobedience”), Huxley, Eliot, Kafka, and Camus. Here is one key passage from “An End to History”:

America is becoming ever more the utopia of sterilized, automated contentment. The “futures” and “careers” for which American students now prepare are for the most part intellectual and moral wastelands. This chrome-plated consumers’ paradise would have us grow up to be well-behaved children. But an important minority of men and women coming to the front today have shown that they will die rather than be standardized, replaceable, and irrelevant. (Qtd. in Cohen 329–32)

Savio’s dire view of students’ future careers echoed cultural critic Paul Goodman’s chapter “Jobs” in Growing up Absurd, another widely read critique of postwar alienation. Connections like these between scholarship and activism also anticipated another factor in our history here, the movement for critical pedagogy prompted by the English translation of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed in 1970 and its adaptations into an American context, especially in English studies and most influentially in Ira Shor’s Critical Teaching and Everyday Life in 1980. A version of Shor’s best-known chapter, “Critical Literacy and the Theme of ‘Work,’” had appeared in 1977 in College English, whose editor then was Richard Ohmann, author of the definitive Marxist critique English in America: A Radical View of the Profession. Shor described his use of a narrative and expressive writing assignment about students’ best and worst jobs as a Freirean generative theme leading step by step (following critical thinking principles of develop-
opining an extended line of argument, reasoning from the concrete to the abstract and from the personal to the impersonal) to the study of tacitly Marxist concepts such as alienated labor. In another chapter, Shor brought a greasy fast-food hamburger to class as a generative theme toward study of the political economy of mass production, marketing, and employment.

Another leading figure in American critical pedagogy has been Henry A. Giroux, whose copious writings, singly and in collaboration with, among others, Susan Searls Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Donald Macedo, Roger Simon, and Freire himself, have been less classroom oriented and more Frankfurt-ish in their analyses of topics such as *Popular Culture, Schooling, and Everyday Life* (Giroux and Simon). As he and Susan Giroux summed up their project, “Pedagogy as a critical practice should [enable] students to . . . struggle with ongoing relations of power . . . and to be critically active citizens in the inter-related local, national, and global public spheres” (“Taking Back” 30). The interdisciplinary Girouxes have maintained a foot in composition studies, having written for *JAC* and speaking at several CCCC conventions. Henry in recent years has continued his advocacy for critical pedagogy by blogging for *Truthout*, as in his recent “The Vital Role of Education in Authoritarian Times.”

The history of the campus New Left in the 1960s culminated with protests against the Vietnam War and lies about it by government officials, which prompted statements such as linguist Noam Chomsky’s famous “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” in 1967: “Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of government, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions.”

Linguist Noam Chomsky’s famous “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” in 1967: “Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of government, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions.”

The history of the campus New Left in the 1960s culminated with protests against the Vietnam War and lies about it by government officials, which prompted statements such as linguist Noam Chomsky’s famous “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” in 1967: “Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of government, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions.” (1). Equally influential was Edward S. Herman and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent* in 1988, with its highly teachable model for propaganda analysis. Protests against the war at the MLA convention in 1968 led to formation there of a Radical Caucus and *Radical Teacher: A Socialist, Feminist, and Anti-Racist Journal*, both at this writing miraculously still active and still led by founders such as Ohmann, Susan O’Malley, Louis Kampf, and Paul Lauter, along with a dedicated younger cohort, now publishing digitally (also see Kampf and Lauter’s *Politics of Literature*).
This whole history, then, was background for two NCTE resolutions on political literacy in the 1970s that were reconfirmed in 2018 (see Diet-erich ix–x). Those resolutions gave rise to the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak, which thrived for over a decade, with a regular column in College English, a Quarterly Review of Doublespeak, an annual Doublespeak Award (to its worst public offenders), and an Orwell Award (to writers who exposed doublespeak). All of these immediate and broader issues soon found their way into collections such as Daniel Dieterich’s Teaching about Doublespeak, Hugh Rank’s Language and Public Policy, and William Lutz’s Beyond Nineteen Eighty Four (all NCTE), and textbooks such as Paul Escholz, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark’s Language Awareness and Jeffrey Schrank’s Deception Detection.

As College English editor, Ohmann, also an initiator of the NCTE resolutions and the doublespeak committee, published a special issue in April 1977 on “Mass Culture, Political Consciousness, and English Studies.” The articles, most oriented toward classroom applications, analyzed ideological dimensions in topics such as sitcoms, soap operas, corporate “public interest” advertising, media stereotypes of blacks, and alternatives to commercial news. The dominant Frankfurt viewpoint came out in pieces such as Carol Lopate Ascher’s “Selling to Ms. Consumer,” Fredric Jameson’s class analysis of Dog Day Afternoon, Todd Gitlin’s “Television’s Screens: Hegemony in Transition,” Kate Ellis’s “Queen for One Day at a Time,” Kampf’s “Teaching a Course on Spectator Sports,” and especially sociologist Stanley Aronowitz’s “Mass Culture and the Eclipse of Reason: The Implications for Pedagogy,” developed from a paper at the 1976 MLA convention, which powerfully applied Frankfurt theory to college composition (“The Eclipse of Reason” alluded to a book by Max Horkheimer).

The writing textbook of the time that I taught regularly was Ray Kytle’s Clear Thinking for Composition, first published by Random House in 1969. Kytle’s version of critical thinking, in sections such as “Blocks to Clear Thinking,” focused precisely on challenging authoritarian mental traits such as “primary certitude” and “compartmentalized thinking” (i.e., double standards and self-contradictions). He indirectly spoke to the spirit of the times in the section “Culturally Conditioned Assumptions”: “Because you live in a particular country, in a particular part of the world, in a particular age; because you were raised in a particular class and educational system by teachers who were also in many ways the product of their culture, you
possess a large collection of attitudes and values whose accuracy, truth, or merit you have never questioned” (36–37; original italics). Did all the later theoretical jargon about “subject positionality” and “interpellation” say anything that Kytle didn’t? He fit this section into writing instruction by describing such assumptions as enthymemes or “implied assertions” in arguments—as in the Cobb cartoon about the boy’s submission to authorities (Figure 1)—that often hide misconceptions and prejudices in mainstream American discourse, which Kytle exemplified in topics such as attitudes toward war, individualism and conformity, the American Dream, free enterprise, and—after the first edition—gender stereotypes, into which he had himself initially lapsed.

Figure 1. Cartoon by Ron Cobb, from Ray Kytle, *Clear Thinking for Composition* (1969), by permission of the artist.
So Kytle was in effect delineating “cultural studies” before the fact. The early 1990s would see a flourishing of excellent anthologies on critical pedagogy and cultural studies, including feminist perspectives, that in effect followed Kytle’s model, in application to writing courses, including those edited by Shor (Freire for the Classroom), James A. Berlin and Michael J. Vivion, Richard Bullock and John Trimbur, C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, Blitz and Hurlbert, and Karen Fitts and Alan France. Few articles like those in these collections have appeared in recent decades of the major comp journals, except for the great JAC, courageously edited by Lynn Worsham.

Downsizing the Public Sphere

In Political Literacy I delineated at length the multiple forces in composition studies that converged in the past few decades to eclipse and even disparage the era of cultural critique that I have surveyed. Here I further develop just a few themes. One step in the dissipation of cultural studies and critical pedagogy lay in the history of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded by Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. It had advanced a Marxist viewpoint similar to the Frankfurt School and to Basil Bernstein’s analysis of restricted and elaborated cognitive/linguistic codes in class socialization, which Hoggart brilliantly applied in The Uses of Literacy and An English Temper to mass media’s destruction of working-class culture. However, Hoggart’s and Williams’s successors such as Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson moved away, some toward Louis Althusser’s jargon-filled philosophical approach in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Many American scholars slavishly imitated Althusserian jargon and that of other European poststructuralists to the point of obscuring any of the stylistic clarity and concrete political and cultural analyses central to earlier critics. (Judith Butler received an ironic award for opaque writing, in a passage in which she opacity defended the opaqueeness of Adorno’s late Negative Dialectics. Butler failed to discuss The Authoritarian Personality or Adorno’s other early works, written in clear prose and analyzing tangible issues such as ”Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture.” Butler herself has laudably dropped the jargon in her powerful journalism on Middle Eastern and other world conflict.) The appropriation into composition pedagogy of postmodern philosophical jargon and anti-rationalism turned us into a punching bag for conservative culture warriors such as Heather MacDonald in the National Interest: “The only thing composition teach-
The appropriation into composition pedagogy of postmodern philosophical jargon and anti-rationalism turned us into a punching bag for conservative culture warriors such as Heather Macdonald in the National Interest: “The only thing composition teachers are not talking or writing about these days is how to teach students to write clear, logical prose.”

Other late-Birmingham critics explored positive studies in resistance, transgression, and appropriations against mass culture by members of the working class. However, this fruitful effort quickly disintegrated in the United States into an infinite multiplication of studies in identity politics, multiculturalism, localism, and diversity that has dominated the field up to the present and—unnecessarily—eclipsed broader political critique. New-Left feminist Ellen Willis, in a 2005 article in *Dissent*, took issue with the tendency of some progressives toward “postmodern rejection of ‘master narratives’ and universal values,” along with “the multiculturalists… celebrating ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusiveness’ within a socioeconomic system whose fundamental premises are taken for granted” (445–46). Taken for granted to the point of its virtual disappearance as a subject of composition theory and pedagogy.

Most recently, historian Mark Lilla’s widely discussed book *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* in 2017 lamented the failure of current college education in general to teach students to resist Trumpian demagogy. Lilla asserted, “Every advance of liberal identity consciousness has marked a retreat of effective liberal political consciousness” (“How Colleges”). No one here argues against the importance of identity issues within a broader political scope—but rather against instances where advocates of identity or local politics ignore broader issues, turning “all politics are local” and “the personal is political” from greater inclusiveness into exclusionary dogma. These tendencies on both the political and cultural left toward social atomization have coincided disastrously with a period of escalating consolidation of national and international power and propaganda by the political-corporate-media right.

The phrase “the public sphere,” invoking Jürgen Habermas, has long been fashionable in composition scholarship, but much of its use is evasively vague and drastically narrows Habermas’s Frankfurt-ish scope, and politics in general, from the Girouxes’ “inter-related local, national, and global public spheres” primarily to local communities and their study. This
shrinkage is apparent in works such as Ellen Cushman’s otherwise superb articles “The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research” in College English and “The Rhetorician as Agent of Social Change” in College Composition and Communication, which deliberately addressed only local studies. Likewise for Susan Wells’s “Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?” in the October 1996 issue of CCC. Wells’s fine essay surveyed a wide terrain of applications of Habermas, from theoretical formulations to the rhetoric surrounding Bill and Hillary Clinton’s health care proposal in 1993. And while she briefly acknowledged the value of classroom “analysis of public discourse,” she clearly was most concerned with “including the texts produced in alternative and counter publics” (338) and with writing in sites beyond the classroom in issues such as a community-police conflict in Philadelphia.

Joseph Harris as editor of CCC, in his introduction to a group of articles in that 1996 issue on “Research, Teaching, Public Argument,” summarized the view of Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy, who argued (in Harris’s paraphrase) that “a Deweyan emphasis on cooperative talk may better encourage students to rethink their political commitments and values than does the aggressive and interventionist stance of many radical teachers” (324). Fishman and McCarthy fail to consider that their judgment was disputable or to allow for any defense of radical teachers such as Ira Shor and the Girouxes, who were explicitly or implicitly reproached, and Harris delineated his disagreements with Shor and critical pedagogy in a later opinion piece for College English (“Revision”).

Harris also stated, “For many of us, ‘the classroom’ has come to figure metonymically for a notion of the public sphere, as our point of contact with the ‘real’ world out there somewhere” (“From the Editor” 323). His wording was ambiguous here. Does “us” include him? Does “metonymically” mean a microcosm, a substitute, or what? What he seemed to accept as a valid aim, though, could equally well describe the notion of a public sphere in the work of many radical teachers. However, Harris more importantly asserted that “we have largely failed to make a convincing case beyond the classroom for the view of literacy that we profess inside it” (324). That may well have been true then, but my thesis here is that, while in the subsequent two decades, composition studies beyond the classroom have laudably become a cottage industry, they have largely displaced the aims of the past and most recent NCTE resolutions for basic political literacy in the classroom.
When Harris returned to his “metonymic” model for classroom study in his influential *A Teaching Subject*, he defined politics as ranging from “a set of issues one writes about to the politics of writing itself—to questions of style, authority, autonomy, stance. . . . One measure of the politics of a teacher might be the range of voices and perspectives that she helps students take on” (91). Models of composition study such as those of Wells, Fishman and McCarthy, or Harris generally assume a “polyvocal” body of students “on the margins”—working class or poor, women, ethnic minorities and immigrants—who have heretofore been silenced, so that we teachers should seek ways to enable them to find their voices in public speech or writing. This model is praiseworthy, but it evades pedagogical attention to the whole realm of Middle American political discourse and its constituent public, including college students. Likewise for Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu in *Representing the ‘Other’*, envisioning the composition class as an arena of “discursive voices which conflict with and struggle against the voices of academic authority” (173). The massive gap in these approaches is that they fail to envision belligerent conservative students whose “discursive voices” intimidate liberal classmates and even teachers (i.e., academic authorities such as Horner and Lu) into silence, mimicking Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh or reciting scripts from Republican front-group campus organizations and "Professor Watchlist." These approaches fail to prepare students (or teachers!) to engage not only with such conservative classmates but with discursive voices in the broader public sphere dominated by demagogues, propagandists, lobbyists, advertisers, and journalistic flame throwers.

For all its virtues, polyvocal-student pedagogy also marked one step in the broader trend in composition toward isolating student writing from the rest of the college curriculum, particularly in the humanities, and from the national public sphere, rather than making composition for critical thinking an integral part of liberal education—which critical pedagogy and cultural studies aimed to do, in their own, politically committed manner. This isolation from general education consequently minimized instruction in writing from sources, including critical analysis of their rhetoric and reasoning, as in propaganda analysis. Moreover, many models for this movement reduced composition to a single first-term (or even basic) writing course, without envisioning a staged sequence of courses, along the lines proposed by Mina Shaughnessy or Sharon Crowley, which moves
from personal to argumentative or critical writing, including analysis of sources. Alas, the current political-financial squeeze on liberal education in public colleges now threatens to extinguish any such sequence of courses altogether, except in affluent private colleges, and return composition to being a “service course” taught by adjuncts with little opportunity to integrate it with humanistic study.

The most prominent current remnant of leftist political education in composition has been the widespread, admirable movement for social justice activism (see Alexander, Kahn, Mathieu, Olson, Rhodes, Riedner, Rosendale and Rosendale, Scott, Welch). The main limitations that I find in these movements is that most assume a constituency of progressive scholars, students, and communities, overlooking “resistance” by conservatives, and that most on campus are situated outside a general education curriculum—including courses in critical thinking, reading, and writing; these can provide a link to academic discourse for activism and protest, as in Hayden, Savio, and the other sources surveyed above. Thus these movements unnecessarily set activism against critical pedagogy and neglect classroom study of, or scholarship on, the rhetoric of mass politics and culture. It well may be that much is actually being taught along the lines I advocate; however, my aim here is not to survey that field but to question why the agenda laid out in the NCTE resolutions has largely been marginalized in recent major journals, books, conferences, and—perhaps most importantly—criteria for faculty hiring and promotion.

Critical pedagogy and cultural studies also survive in many rhetoric or reader textbooks, along the lines of *Rereading America* (Colombo et al.) However, there is again an odd disconnect between this realm and that of the major scholarly journals and book publishers. Exemplary exceptions to the paucity of scholarship about conservative students include Russell K. Durst’s *Collision Course* and Irvin Peckham’s *Going North Thinking West*, scholarly books that sensitively explore conservative students’ resistance to textbooks such as *Rereading America*. Jennifer Seibel Trainor has provided another valuable model for applying the issues addressed here to scholarly research, in several English journal articles and a book, *Rethinking Racism*,

**The current political-financial squeeze on liberal education in public colleges now threatens to...**

return composition to being a “service course” taught by adjuncts with little opportunity to integrate it with humanistic study.
reporting ethnographic studies of students in virtually all-white, conservative high schools.

In my own published pedagogical models, I have urged colleagues who assume that most college students are among the marginalized or culturally diverse also to develop courses in what I term “pedagogy of those who support the oppressor,” within the framework of critical thinking and rhetorical analysis. I used a debate format, welcoming conservative students, many of whom relished the chance to speak out and weigh their arguments in a reasoned, evidence-supported manner against opposing ones, and to be rewarded in grades accordingly. I assigned books such as Rush Limbaugh’s or recent presidential speeches, requiring that students fact-check and appraise them in their reasoning against opposing sources—thereby emphasizing interdisciplinary research and critical reading—and then have students base their discursive voices in debate on these studies.

**Popular versus Mass Culture**

In *Political Literacy* I delineated at length several other causes in the past few decades of composition studies in *CCC* and elsewhere that have led to abandonment of the critique of authoritarian mass society and culture and its incorporation in teaching—which I can, again, only sketchily condense here. One frequent source of misunderstanding is the use of “popular culture” as a synonym for “mass culture.” “Popular” can mean either populist/democratic, generated by and for ordinary people among their peers, or it can refer to what is widely circulated, commonly known, or in style. In the first sense, “populist/democratic” applies mainly to politics and social class and is opposed to “authoritarian” and “elite.” This usage is sometimes genuine and sometimes fraudulent—the pretense of elitists to be populists, as in the plain folks fallacy. The more common use of “popular” refers to anything or anyone widely known and liked. Confusion sets in when popular culture in this sense is abbreviated into terms like “pop music,” which refers most often to a product of Horkheimer and Adorno’s mass culture “industry.” So substituting “popular” or “pop” for “mass” culture evades the whole issue of authoritarian politics, media, and the millions of their compliant followers (as in Trump’s “base”), including many of our students.
many of our students. My following section, “Same Old, Same Old Mass Society?” further explores the complicated mixture of “popular/populist” and “mass” in current American politics and culture.

These confluences of popular and mass culture are related to several further equivocations. Virtually all of the earlier thinkers surveyed above believed that they were taking the side of democracy in advocating critical consciousness in the populace to resist domination and manipulation by political, corporate, and media elites. In Masscult and Midcult, one-time Trotskyist Dwight Macdonald answered those who accused critics like him of snobbery toward ordinary people: “It is precisely because I believe in the potentialities of ordinary people that I criticize Masscult” (10). Some postmodern populists, such as Kurt Spellmeyer in College Composition and Communication in 1997, asserted that critics of mass culture are the elitists, displaying “profound loathing for ordinary people,” whose “multiple literacies and multiple cultures” we should all instead be celebrating (“Culture” 295). This false dilemma implied mutual exclusion between encouraging multiculturalism and teaching students of all cultures to be critical of mass politics, society, and the culture industry. Such accusations implicitly turned Macdonald’s “Lords of Masscult” into champions of populism. Likewise, I interpret Marcuse’s diatribe against “systematic moronization” as referring to attempts to moronize the masses, quite aside from the complex question of how much or little they succeed—although Trump’s election was one depressing index of success.

Critics of mass culture have further been labeled by some cultural pluralists as “Eurocentric” or “patriarchal.” In Classics and Trash: Traditions and Taboos in High Literature and Popular Modern Genres, Harriet Hawkins argued that much pop culture “has in practice if not in theory been a great deal more democratic and far less elitist, even as it has often been demonstrably less sexist, than the academically closeted critical tradition” (p. xvii). (I analyze similar arguments by rhetcomp feminists in the section “Is Mass Culture Feminist?” in Political Literacy, 121–25). Hawkins’s line is provocative, yet it equivocates between pop and mass culture and is too sweeping in its dismissal of academic criticism. I submit, first, that the culture industry itself shows far more “profound loathing toward ordinary people” than any prominent critic of it. I worked briefly in New York as a publicist for Dick Clark’s American Bandstand, whose producers sneered at the “pimple music” they churned out solely for profit. And mass culture
is much more sexist, with its contempt for “irrational” women: “The average housewife is too stupid to see there’s no difference.” Second, Hawkins’s put-down of academic critics as sexist is surely accurate about some, notably among the Frankfurt School founders, but by no means all. By the time she was writing, in 1990, a large school of brilliant, academic leftists—feminists were criticizing mass society/culture; for samples see all my above citations, along with others in my collection *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*. Tania Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* and other works have been misinterpreted by some feminists as affirming the depiction of women in mass culture, whereas she argued that genres such as soap opera may contain some progressive dimensions, but they are outweighed by their over-all regressive, patriarchal elements.

So these confections of “mass” and “popular” have contributed—along with diverse other factors, to be sure—to giving the power elite and its hidden persuaders a free ride and to remove them, up to the present day, as a subject for teaching and critical inquiry in composition. To reiterate once more my earlier point, there is currently an admirable movement of social justice activism, mainly extracurricular, but doesn’t it generally exclude criticism of mass society and media within undergraduate composition curricula, scholarly publications, and hiring and promotion criteria?

**Same Old, Same Old Mass Society?**

I contend that the overall structures of mass social control, their propaganda agencies and methods identified in the NCTE resolutions, remain largely intact though unaddressed in current composition scholarship or pedagogy. Despite all the refinements of earlier critical cultural studies, how much has basically changed in American mass society? Have war making and the military-industrial-media complex withered away? Or the power elite, which has become ever more entrenched under neoliberalism’s worldwide corporate conglomeration and concentration of wealth in the .01 percent? Are there no more liars and purveyors of doublespeak in public places? No more junk food malnutrition or environmental waste and destruction? No
more regimentation and alienation imposed on students and workers? I would trade all the volumes of esoteric poststructuralist/postmodern theory for Shor’s greasy hamburger or Savio’s “The ‘futures’ and ‘careers’ for which American students now prepare are for the most part intellectual and moral wastelands,” a judgment in which even my conservative students felt the shock of recognition.

In cultural rather than political-economic matters, the situation has become steadily more complicated. Certainly in our time the lines between popular and mass culture have increasingly blurred. Many mass-produced works speak authentically and enduringly to both popular and intellectual sensibility. Think *The Wizard of Oz* and *Casablanca*, Sinatra and the Beatles, the creators of the great American songbook and musical comedy, jazz, blues, and dance. Still, many creators of pop classics have confessed that they either thought they were turning out commercial garbage or were sneaking quality work past their philistine bosses.

Fluidity between high, popular, and mass culture is likewise evident in the “new golden age of television,” in which premium channels such as HBO pioneered high-quality long-form dramas such as the bawdy-Shakespearean *Deadwood* (whose creator David Milch was an ABD in literature at Yale), which trickled down to commercial channels in memorable works such as *Breaking Bad* on AMC (these channels’ annoying commercial interruptions can now mercifully be skipped on DVDs or subscription streaming channels).

But have we really gotten over, in Neil Postman’s Frankfurt-ish titles, “The Teaching of the Media Curriculum” and *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, or Huxley’s “non-stop distraction . . . for the purpose of preventing people from paying too much attention to the realities of the social and political situation”? From infancy, we are inundated with incessant, comic-book-level media images of bloodshed, fistfights, gunfights, car crashes, and explosions. Commercials, whose profits for corporate media owners and advertisers are the main reason for being of most TV and radio programs, have been allowed to proliferate in frequency, loudness, and stupidity, with
the same ones repeated over and over again, as during every time-out in sports broadcasts. Indeed, the time-outs have multiplied mainly to enable more commercials, as have the sheer number of broadcasts of collegiate as well as pro sports. Colleges that have long been known as football factories have become exponentially more so as telecast income has become the tail that wags their dog as academic financing dwindles. The pre–pro star players, many black, get big scholarships and perks, on the way to multimillion dollar careers, while academic support for minorities shrinks and public funding for their communities is gutted.

Hard liquor commercials, formerly banned, project an image of American youth spending all their spare time boozing and dancing. Advertising in general depicts inordinate numbers of affluent, carefree white people dancing and laughing uproariously amid their “consumers’ paradise,” with the occasional token young minority woman boogeying to “I got my mon-EEY!” It all evokes Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor: “In their leisure hours, we shall make their lives like a child’s game, with children’s songs and innocent dance” (239–40). Sitcoms infantilize viewers with canned laugh tracks. Twenty-four seven TV news and sportscasts, chopped up into ever-shorter sound-and-sight bites, are overlaid by hyperactive music and military drumbeats. Texting and Twitter have been one more step toward universal attention deficit disorder. The internet and social media have created a giant leap forward in cognitive, political, and aesthetic vistas, but for many users who do not learn to seek out these vistas, they can just amplify the worst traits of mass society and culture. Composition courses should include instruction in using these sources with political and intellectual discretion.

Contrary to Hawkins’s claim about pop culture’s feminism, what influence of Betty Friedan’s criticisms of “the feminine mystique” and Naomi Wolf’s of “the beauty myth” is visible in advertising, TV, and movies today? As in Cabaret amid Germans’ distractions from the rise of Nazism, “Here everyone is beautiful.” The change of TV news from being a loss leader into a profit maker larded with commercials has resulted in somber, professional news reporters (regrettably most male), being replaced by slim young fashion models with pearly teeth, heavy makeup, elegant blond tresses, and cleavage, exchanging “happy talk news” with their Ken Doll partners. Thank goodness at least for serious-minded Barbara Starr, Candy Crowley, and Rachel Maddow. Are all of these, and countless other instances of political
and corporate attempts to debase American public discourse, which are high among Kytle’s “culturally conditioned assumptions,” no longer valid subject matter for composition studies?

**Right-Wing Deconstruction**

Finally, the often-unqualified championing of progressive populism and identity politics has left the door wide open for co-option by Trumpian appeal to right-wing populism. Conservative culture warriors were quick to latch onto left-populist arguments and echo them in defense of conservative “ordinary citizens” against “the cultural elite.” American Neo-Nazis have now figured out how to present themselves as an oppressed, silenced minority, as they chant, “White lives matter” and “You will not replace us. Jews will not replace us.” In this “post-truth” world, college education, cosmopolitanism, intellect, reason, science, and responsible journalism are derided as “fake news” expressing only the subjective biases of liberals or radicals, which can be refuted by conservative “alternative facts.”

To be clear, I do not suggest that composition scholars have caused Trumpery but only (1) that indiscriminate affirmations of “ordinary people” and cultural relativism have ingenuously failed to include qualifications that would prevent their being co-opted by the extreme right wing, and (2) that we have consequently defaulted on upholding one valuable site of opposition to Trumpery, precisely through teaching “clear, logical prose” that exposes fallacious, demagogic rhetoric. If composition scholars are labeled cultural elitists for centering our course designs and pedagogy on alerting students of all ethnicities, gender identities, and classes to the mind-numbing effects of authoritarian mass society, then so be it. Pending the arrival of that long-deferred classless society, we need to stand up for the survival of higher education, whose “culture of critical discourse,” in Marxist sociologist Alvin Gouldner’s term, at least can provide a common language for disparate progressive movements and enable progressive academics to side with left-wing populism against the fake populism of the
Trumpist right-wing elites who pretend to care for the masses only in order to dominate and swindle them.

**Postscript/Postmortem**

The recent American lurch to the political right climaxed by Trump’s election obliges us to place the history I have traced here in a new perspective. Today, the campus New Left appears to have been historically situated mainly as a morally based protest movement within a privileged segment of the burgeoning postwar middle class, as acknowledged in the opening sentence of *The Port Huron Statement*: “We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit” (Students, 329). Both Students for a Democratic Society and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement were largely generated by working-class and middle-class students who had only recently been enabled to gain admission to Ivy League–level public universities such as Ann Arbor and Berkeley. Their protests were voiced in the academic discourse they acquired in liberal arts courses there, including the forms of cultural criticism promulgated by a generation of leftist professors and intellectuals. Through those prosperous years, many “tenured radicals,” including myself, managed to publish in prestigious scholarly journals and presses, become respected as journalistic sources and TV “talking heads,” get funded to speak in lectures and conferences, be as Marxist, deconstructionist, feminist, ethnic, or queer as they wanted to be, and still become endowed professors or high-level administrators.

All that now looks like a brief historical idyll. In an unbroken progression since Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California in 1966, campaigning on a mission to “clean up the mess at Berkeley”—beginning with imposing tuition for the first time in the history of the University of California—a right-wing backlash led mainly by the Republican Party has sought to reverse the 1960s. The means have included escalating assaults on public K–12 and higher education, through strident attack campaigns on “the liberal elite” and “political correctness” in academia, and most effectively through draconian government funding cuts in education budgets and student financial aid at every level, targeting liberal arts and general education, including composition, as dispensable in this (artificially contrived) age of financial austerity and privileging of STEM education. Liberal
education and critical thinking are, paradoxically, reverting to be a privilege of the rich, who have a conflicting stake in maintaining the status quo.

Under this escalating assault on us, the kind of intramural disputes that I have surveyed here pale in significance. All of us senior scholars—Bloomian traditionalists, Marxist critical teachers, multiculturalists, post-structuralists, and advocates of social justice activism—are in the same, sinking boat, with a diminishing line of successors once we go. Meanwhile, political and fiscal pressures from outside the profession—and all too often reproduced within it—have intensified insecurity and avoidance of political controversy in the bottom ranks: the new PhD job seekers up against an ever-shrinking market, the adjuncts deprived of teaching autonomy, the lucky few tenure-track junior faculty neglecting teaching because they are desperate to publish or perish (see Composition in the Age of Austerity, edited by Nancy Welch and Tony Scott, especially “The Death of Composition” by Ann Larson). None of these dire circumstances negate the intrinsic value of the kind of cultural critique I advocate here, but they have tragically stifled its revival.

Finally, a little-acknowledged irony is that journals such as College English, College Composition and Communication, and Composition Forum have now ditched theory and reverted to privileging small-scale, quasi-scientific research models and studies, also stripped of the personal voices and “stories” prized in previous decades. Such research has, quite arbitrarily, become the prime requirement for hiring and promotion, to the neglect of teaching or even research about teaching. Sic transit composition study, in any and all directions except “education’s most basic purpose: preparing young people to be reflective citizens who would value liberty and democracy and resist the appeals of demagogues.” However, these are all subjects to pursue in other forums...
Works Cited


———. “Revision as a Critical Practice.” *College English*, vol. 65, no. 6, 2003, pp. 577–92.


Horn, Bruce, and Min-Zhan Lu. *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing*. NCTE, 1999.


Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance:*
Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women. Methuen.


**Donald Lazere**

Donald Lazere, professor emeritus of English at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, currently lives in Knoxville. The third edition of his *Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy: The Critical Citizen’s Guide to Argumentative Rhetoric*, coauthored by Anne-Marie Womack, is forthcoming from Routledge. He welcomes responses to this article at dlazere@igc.org.