
In *Prisoners of Conscience: Moral Vernaculars of Political Agency*, Gerard A. Hauser delivers a compelling and nuanced account of imprisoned dissidents’ capacity to issue morally persuasive rights claims to disengaged, distant, even openly hostile audiences. Boldly setting his irreducibly rhetorical conceptualization of “a thick moral vernacular of human rights” against Michael Ignatieff’s cunning reduction of “vernacular” to the specialized language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” Hauser rightly insists on attending to the singular challenge of the situation at hand: wild asymmetries of power. What, he queries over the course of five case studies, are the conditions of possibility for speaking truth to power from way, way down below? How was it that political inmates on Robben Island were able not only to subvert the barbaric norms of their everyday but, even more, set the terms of South Africa’s democracy to come? How did the women of the Small Zone at Barashevo contest the Soviet hierarchy and transform the space of bare life into a place of dignity and hope? Why did the hunger strike of Bobby Sands and nine other IRA inmates in Northern Ireland’s Maze Prison at Long Kesh finally, finally induce a reversal of power? What lends Indres Naidoo’s *Island of Chains* and *The Interrogation* its power to empty official speech of its authority and force? And, exactly what are the conditions of possibility for the photographs that pass too easily under the name “the Abu Ghraib scandal” to ever incite an American crisis of real moral conscience? The short answer: A code switch from the political order to the moral register that releases the POC’s discourse from the steely and sovereign grip of the logic of imputation and sutures it to the logic of accountability. The longer answer: A selected history of situated rhetorical performances that, in wielding the force of ‘weak’ rhetorical tactics such as frank speech, indirection, passive aggression, display, and framing, changed the very ground rules of the game.

But there is more. Indeed, scholars of rhetoric and critical communication studies will also find *Prisoners of Conscience* valuable for the way it challenges an array of commonplace scholarly assumptions, without abandoning the central idea common to most traditional studies of rhetoric and political communication, that the art of citizenship is about coming to voice in response to conditions that call. First, the book productively challenges common assumptions about the place in which rhetoric takes place—exploring ways speakers find and create opportunities to speak amidst the seemingly
unbearable scenic constraints of their imprisonment. Hauser reads the prison and the body of the prisoner as loci of political speech able to transform the repressive apparatus of the penitentiary into a deliberative forum. Despite a new attentiveness to minoritarian publics and discourse, the overwhelming majority of studies in the discipline focus on modes of appeal within already established paradigms of recognition and decorum. In such situations, deliberative rhetors negotiate points of difference within a broadly consensual stance in which they already agree about nearly everything that matters. By contrast, in the cases Hauser examines one of this can be taken for granted. The prisoner’s ideas, identity positions, and even the language in which his or her claims are uttered may be deemed to be criminal as a matter of official state policy. In such cases, the audience, forum, doxa, and status of the speaker must be outcomes rather than preconditions of a successful persuasive appeal. Hauser’s work thus theorizes an atypical but important rhetorical situation in which an utterance creates the conditions of its recognition as political speech.

Second, the book develops an innovative approach to understanding the role of the rhetorical critic. Hauser engages in an unusually ethically charged and, therefore, demanding mode of criticism in which the role of the critic is first and foremost to attune him- or herself to hear—to hear the voices of those distant in time and space and whose voices have been silenced or obscured. He cultivates an ear for the other and models a way of welcoming that interrupts our projects and calls us to take up new forms of moral and political obligation. To welcome the call of obligation means being attuned to the ways we are inextricably bound to one another in innumerable ways. And, once we recognize our responsibility to those to whom we are bound, the challenge, which is ever present, is to maintain fidelity to those obligations. As Hauser’s work so artfully demonstrates, one of the ways we may maintain fidelity and endure in our obligations is by amplifying what we have heard—making those quiet, distant voices resonate and ring out. Prisoners of Conscience models this approach throughout, using vivid, thick description to better attune the reader to the voice of the dissident and the social and political context out of which that voice emerges.

Third, Hauser’s book refocuses critical attention on the classical sense that rhetoric is a dunamis—a potential power or capacity. Here, of course, we refer to Aristotle’s definition in Book I of the Rhetoric which states that rhetoric is not only an art of speaking, but also describes a dunamis theoresai that stands logically and temporally prior to speech. That is, rhetoric is an ability to see, hear, and experience the world in a way that allows its meaningfulness to come to presence before the listener. Hauser’s work reveals and celebrates the dunamis of rhetoric into two ways. This power of rhetoric is evident to the
extent that repressive political regimes mobilize such incredibly violent weaponry to try to stifle the speech of the prisoner of conscience. We see many techniques of so-called interrogation working very acutely to disrupt an individual’s rhetorical *dunamis*, sometimes doing so without brutally violating the body itself. Further, the power of human capacity for meaning-making and action is evident in the fact that in so many of the cases Hauser presents, such acts of reactionary violence seem only to strengthen and charge the body and voice of the prisoner. The book suggests that there may be some reservoir of almost limitless strength within human beings that even the most brutal totalitarian organization ultimately cannot fully contain. Rhetorical *dunamis* may be the best name for this essential human capacity to create and sustain worlds in which hope can take flight.

Readers familiar with contemporary European political theory may be most interested in Hauser’s engagement with the work of Giorgio Agamben. Indeed, *Prisoners of Conscience* often reads as an extended case-driven counterstatement to Agamben’s pessimistic analysis of the ubiquity of modern technologies for producing “bare life” incapable of authentic political agency. Whereas Agamben provocatively argues that the camp is the *nomos* of modern biopolitical life, Hauser counters with an array of compelling examples of men and women transforming prison camps themselves into political forums. In his view, the “moral vernacular of human rights escapes the dystopian vision of the state of exception and bare life Agamben regards as the currently ongoing and universal condition of sovereignty. As long as there is a language outside official power that can speak its own language of power to others who share it, subjugation to bare life is always being contested under the surface” (120).

Driven by this commitment to explore examples of contemporary political agency, Hauser focuses on cases that reveal the strength of the human spirit and the power of rhetorical action to turn physical and symbolic wastelands into more humane, inhabitable worlds. In this regard, *Prisoners of Conscience* resonates with the work of thinkers such as Badiou and Rancière who have also sought to explore the emergence of counter-hegemonic political formations within contemporary situations characterized by a totalizing “police” logic. Due in part to his deep immersion in the rhetorical tradition, Hauser’s study of agential action includes a pragmatic dimension that is often somewhat underdeveloped in other scholarly attempts to theorize “the political”: He seeks to show how dissidents achieved political recognition despite facing a panoply of techniques utilized by the biopolitical state to silence authentic oppositional voices.

The decision to focus on moral and political triumphs does, however, limit the scope of the text in some ways that should be acknowledged. First, it
should be noted that for every Mandela or Havel who rises from imprisonment to mainstream political power, there are countless others who are simply broken by state violence. *Prisoners of Conscience* says comparatively little about these men and women, whose voices are never heard and whose ideals do not come to fruition in new counter-hegemonic articulations, perhaps unwittingly positioning them, among other possibilities, as self-made victims. Second, the book primarily focuses on political agents who issue moral claims with which the author and many of his readers are likely to agree: anti-apartheid activism, freedom of speech and association for dissidents, the prohibition of torture. One wonders how the lessons learned in *Prisoners of Conscience* might be applied to more morally ambiguous cases. While Hauser explicitly claims that moral judgments are robustly rhetorical accomplishments, his cases at times seem to suggest that rhetorical action was only a means for achieving self-evidently correct (philosophically or theologically derived) moral causes. Could the rise of racist nationalism or patriarchal religious fundamentalism also be described as an emergent “thick moral vernacular rhetoric”? The book provokes but does not fully address the perennial conservative critique of Rhetoric, that the abandonment of onto-theological grounds for moral judgment makes a Pandemonium of the *polis*.

Scholars seeking to draw from and expand upon the insights of *Prisoners of Conscience* may also need to broaden the scope of its titular term. For Hauser,

> Political prisoners occupy a unique rhetorical space. Unlike convicted felons who break the law for personal gain or through criminal recklessness, blind passion, or folly, POCs are incarcerated for the threat of their ideas. Often the only law they have broken is the (unspoken) prohibition against disagreement with a hegemonic power. When their legal violations do involve acts of violence, they stem from embracing ideas at odds with the existing order. (5)

This distinction may be a bit too tidy to address contemporary and somewhat more ambiguous cases. Consider, for instance, the status of the thousands of men and women currently in long-term solitary confinement within “administrative segregation” facilities in U.S. domestic prisons. While they may be incarcerated for “nonpolitical” crimes, many remain in solitary confinement because of their commitment to their political identity, their comrades, and their ideas and affiliations. Inmates believed to be associated with organized “gangs” are often subject to administrative segregation even if they have not committed any specifically gang-related crimes. The so-called
“prison within a prison” is full of men and women who are in solitary confinement because of their conscience and their commitment to maintaining fidelity to their identity and its values: those who have refused to plea-bargain, confess guilt, turn state’s evidence, inform on friends and family, renounce gang/community affiliations, and comply with institutional mandates they feel are racist or otherwise unjust (Shalev, 2009; Rhodes, 2004). *Prisoners of Conscience* offers many rich insights that might inform a critical analysis of such cases, even if they do not meet the author’s narrower criteria for determining POC status.

About this important work of rhetorical theory and criticism that should provoke readers to more carefully attend to the challenges of speaking in fidelity to moral and political truths and hearing them, one final point needs to be made about the rhetorical force of arrangement. As noted at the start, the case studies that together constitute *Prisoners of Conscience* transports its U.S. readers to Apartheid South Africa, circa the 1960s; it then ushers us into the 1980s and the world of KGB; from there we are shuttled to Belfast, again the early 1980s, and reintroduced to the harsh realities of British colonial rule; and then a harrowing trip back to Robben Island and horrific tour in the prison there. Last, but certainly not least, we land where the CIA set up its satellite operation, the Abu Ghraib prison in occupied Iraq. Thus, although not its explicit argument, a powerful claim is rhetorically performed by the structure of the book itself—from then to now, from there to here, right here ‘at home’: namely, that what may be as crucial to the moral and political resubjectivation of readers and listeners is not only a rhetoric that promotes the witness’s positive attachment to the other, but also one that induces a negative relation to the self. *Prisoners of Conscience* thus challenges its readers to attend not only or even primarily to the verbal and embodied rhetorical production of identification between, but also, and more important, to the violent introduction of difference within ourselves.

Michael P. Vicaro
Barbara A. Biesecker
Works Cited

