

A Neo-Aristotelian Analysis of
Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's Women's Liberation Rhetoric

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During the late 1960's and early 1970's in the United States, Women's liberation garnered its second wave of momentum (Campbell, "Revisited" 1). Although women had made slight progress socially, for example the right to vote, much was desired by women who were still considered a minority group in our society at the time. Married women relied on their husbands for almost all financial support, in nine community property states women could not have credit in their own names (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 173), and a woman's right to choose did not exist until 1973.

From a male perspective, women belonged in the home raising children and performing domestic chores. For women who were involved as advocates for equal rights, they were often equated by their opponents as immoral, sexually explicit and masochistic, prostitutes, or lesbians (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 177). People involved in the women's liberation movement were difficult for society to accept other than them being social outcasts. Their advocacy violated all of the reality structure in the United States at the time (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 177). By the 1980's, "the contemporary women's movement had attracted much public attention in the past decade. Changes in laws, a range of new public policies and programs, women entering the paid workforce in ever-increasing numbers, as well as a plethora of public and private differences in women's roles and status had become well established in the American consciousness" (Kroll 139). But how did women truly view themselves at the beginning of the second wave? What was the reality structure forty years ago and what is it today? What are the rhetorical similarities between the women's rights movement and other equal rights movements? The last question is the one that needs most investigation.

Using neo-Aristotelian criticism, I will examine the influence of women's liberation in U.S. society both then and now. I will primarily use one artifact by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in the analysis which is her first essay written in 1973. I will use another essay as a secondary artifact and supporting evidence. The first essay from 1973 entitled "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron" was actually a speech that Campbell delivered at the Western States Convention. The second essay was written by her more recently in 1999, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron Revisited." It is a commentary that reveals changes Campbell would make if she were writing the same speech 25 years later (Campbell, "Revisited" 1.)

I will compare and contrast Campbell's ideas and judgments from both of her essays to the GLBT equality movements. Then, I will make my own ascertations in support of or against her ideas. I was born after abortion was legalized, and my college career began in the early 1990's when Campbell would have been gathering data and

preparing to deliver her second essay on the women's liberation movement. I will analyze the context in which the first essay was presented and I will apply four of the five canons of rhetoric, addressing the impact that the first essay had on the movement and its intended audiences. Likely, her second essay will be more closely aligned with my beliefs about equality for women and will support society's newer perception of women because the data will be current with trends seen in my generation.

KARLYN KOHRS CAMPBELL AS RHETOR

I will examine three areas that will provide the context for the artifact: Campbell as a rhetor including her background and credentials, the occasions during which the rhetoric was presented, and the audience to whom the rhetoric is being addressed.

Understanding Campbell's background and education helps explain her contributions and involvement in the women's liberation movement. Campbell is a married woman who attended graduate school in the late 1960's. This was at the dawn of the second wave of women's liberation. In so, she faced prejudices towards women in her field (Campbell, "Revisited" 1). Campbell's ideas were aimed at the typical American woman. Her philosophies were geared towards women individually, and sometimes larger groups or audiences of women. Her thoughts and ideas were not geared toward androgynous people, lesbians, or divorcees as opponents to women's liberation sometimes made it out to be. To offer a sense of how more radical opponents feel about women's liberation, I quote the Christian fundamentalist Pat Robertson: "The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians" ("Counter Attack" 43).

At the time Campbell prepared the first essay and when she was beginning her professional career, women's liberation rhetoric was categorized by the use of confrontation strategies that "violated the reality structure" at the time. The ideas she expressed were radical and the "(confrontation) strategies not only attacked the psychosocial reality of the culture, but also violated the norms of decorum, morality, and 'femininity' of the women addressed" (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 177).

As a result of her contributions at the Western States Conference, Campbell was invited to a colloquium at the University of Minnesota, and the essay has been presented to audience after audience and rhetoric class after rhetoric class, including my own at the University of Houston Downtown. I selected it as my artifact because it is part of my curriculum this semester and the movement itself intrigues me in how it may relate to other equality movements.

In addition to the reputation the essay earned Campbell early in her career, she continues as a scholarly person today. Karlyn Campbell is the head of Communications Studies at the University of Minnesota and continues to conduct research in rhetorical criticism and theory, women's communication, and social movements (Campbell, "Homepage" 1). She has taught at California State College in L.A. and also at S.U.N.Y. at Binghamton in New York. Having taught at California State College exposed Campbell to a diverse student population: older and younger students, bilingual students, African American, Chicano, and Asian students. She spent additional time researching the movement during the 1990's while living in New York City with her husband, which resulted in her revisiting her original work that she affectionately refers to as the "the Oxymoron essay" (Campbell, "Revisited" 1).

Not only was Campbell well informed by her own research of women in striving for equality, she was also a woman herself. She was an insider. This factor certainly influences her writings on women's liberation. I will go into more detail later about how, as Campbell says, she could have done better in the first essay by being more inclusive of women from other cultures. Most men and even some women did not respond favorably to this historical political movement. Symbolic reversals such as lesbians as the paradigm of liberated females or perhaps the androgenous role were appearing in opposition to the protest rhetoric of the time (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 177). When taking into consideration the traditional female roles such as wife or mother, these reversals were obviously disturbing (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 177).

The intended audiences and the paradigm used to reach women then was called "Consciousness raising", which involves meetings of small leaderless groups. Women were encouraged to express their personal feelings and experiences in these groups (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 175). Anyone listening "must admit that this is not a society based on the value of equality or make the overt assertion that women are special or inferior beings who merit discriminatory treatment" (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 173). Campbell shared the same background ideologies as her audiences, and they all possessed something similar: the desire for equal rights and "personal is political" (Campbell, "Revisited" 3). Campbell correctly assumed the existence of a gap between the values underlying our nation, particularly as expressed in natural rights philosophies, and economic, legal, and social practices for women. The demands of women were treated as revolutionary (Campbell, "Revisited" 2). Of course, it was not only activist women that Campbell was trying to reach. She also had to persuade complacent women and hostile men who were not receptive to the rhetoric of women's liberation.

ANALYSIS OF CAMPBELL'S RHETORIC

I will be using four of the five canons of rhetoric to analyze Campbell's first essay. I will examine how Campbell used invention, organization, style, and delivery in order to persuade her audiences. Campbell uses two general categories, substance and style, instead of the five modes of proof in her original essay. Mapping these four categories will not be challenging considering that Campbell elaborates on all the canons in her 1999 commentary.

Invention

In 1966, Campbell began collecting feminist materials through a network distributing mimeographed copies of early essays. Later, she began covering activists and activities in print and electronic media (Campbell, "Revisited" 1). As stated earlier, she was exposed to diverse groups of women ranging in ages, ethnicities, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Likewise, as a woman herself she possesses first hand knowledge of the difficulties women faced at the time. Campbell is correct when she says that the demands for equal opportunities in education, the workplace, and in the courts could not be separated from the impact those have on the self and in interpersonal relationships (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 3).

Campbell contradicts herself in her invention, and her logic may appear unsubstantiated at second glance. Campbell concludes in her original essay that women's liberation is a unified, separate genre of rhetoric with distinctive substantive-stylistic features. In her opening, she says that "no clearly defined program or set of policies unifies the small, frequently transitory groups that compose" the movement (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 172.) This could create confusion for early audiences, but today the evidence of a defined and cohesive women's liberation movement exists with many of the battles for equal rights having been won. Campbell says that "my work on historical feminism was still far in the future" in her later commentary (Campbell, "Revisited" 3). I tend to disagree with that too, considering the amount of social progress women made during the 1970's and early 1980's.

She acknowledges the contradiction in her later commentary in saying "whatever we have learned about the social construction of reality through symbols underscores the sense in which social change is symbolic or rhetorical at its foundation" (Campbell, "Revisited" 2). This does not make it a separate genre. Campbell also states that the "traditional or familiar definitions of persuasion do not satisfactorily account for the rhetoric of women's liberation" (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 179). One might consider a definition by Sillars that traditional social movements are a combination of events occurring over time and often encompass public issues in a linear fashion (Sillars 107). The issues concerning women's liberation at first sight are "private and domestic" and "anything but trivial" (Campbell, "Revisited" 4). For Campbell, they were not linear. In my analysis, the plight of women's liberation is linear, they have occurred over time, they can be considered public, and they are certainly symbolic. This conclusion is based on the current status of women's liberation and events that have occurred over the past 40 years. I disagree with Campbell

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that the women's liberation movement is "private and domestic" or that it "cannot usefully be analyzed by some general template" because considering the movement in broader terms shows that it fits traditional definitions such as Sillars' definition above. (Campbell, "Revisited" 2). Let us focus more evidence on its linearity.

The long term linear effects of women's liberation are clearly evident. Long before Campbell's first essay, the 19th Amendment was passed in 1920 giving women full suffrage. Then, women won the right to choose in 1973 with the historic Supreme Court case *Roe vs. Wade*. This occurred just after her first essay was written and delivered. Today, long after Campbell began writing about the movement, we have our first female Speaker of The House, Nancy Pelosi. In the near future we potentially will have our first female president if Hillary Clinton is elected in November 2008. These are progressive, public, and linear events.

Campbell attempts to establish her "ethos" in her original essay by using the ideas of "sisterhood" and "genre". She later rejects them saying that "the presumption of 'sisterhood' that infused the beginnings of the second wave discourse has proved false for many and has been attacked by those who felt excluded from much of its talk, action, and organization" (Campbell, "Revisited" 4). Having acknowledged this almost 30 years later does not help her appeal to her audiences during the early 1970's. Further, Campbell asserts in her second essay that one can not "homogenize" the movement under the rubric of "sisterhood" because of the differences among women: religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic (Campbell, "Revisited" 4). Campbell admits in her later commentary that "as a white feminist, I focused attention on the rhetoric and the activists that spoke to my condition, ignoring those whose ethnicities and concerns were different" (Campbell, "Revisited" 4). This certainly impacted her credibility early on because certain classes and ethnicities of women were excluded. It caused me to reflect on my own short-sightedness in my participation in social protest movements, which I will reflect on in my commentary and conclusion below.

Organization

Campbell uses a problem-solution order in her original essay. She defines the central argument that women's liberation is "a distinctive genre because it evinces unique rhetorical qualities that are a fusion of" substance and style (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 172). After introducing the central argument, she sets out to prove it, offering solutions to women on how to conduct themselves in the movement and how to attract new participants. A perfect example of the organization comes from the "notion that men are male humans whereas women are human females" (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 173). She supports the argument with the marriage vows "I now pronounce you man and wife". Campbell contends this should be abolished because the distinctions lead to cultural values for men as men and women as wives (Campbell, "Oxymoron" 173). For the most part, she focuses on the sex role, equal rights, and women's status in U.S. society at the time she wrote the first essay.

The essay is wholly appropriate for a female audience, particularly because of its style and the compelling use of excerpts and quotes from other female liberationists. But a significant male presence in the audience would have difficulty with some of the language. Referring back to the marriage vow argument, one might consider this: many cultures around the world use “I now pronounce you man and wife.” Should traditions such as marriage vows be adjusted when most people - men and women alike - are content with it? It does not sound like a convincing argument because a significant amount of the audience could be living in unhappy marriages and would readily accept the idea.

Style

Campbell makes good persuasive use of quotes in her essay. Sometimes the quotes use expletives or provocative language. From my perspective, the quotes adequately capture the audience’s attention, but at times seem a bit sensational. The most profound quote is an excerpt from “Cutting Loose”:

The most dramatic conclusion of this narrative should be the dissolution of my marriage; there is a part of me which believes that you cannot fight a sexist system while acknowledging your need for the love of a man... But in the end my husband and I did not divorce... Instead I raged against him for many months and joined the Woman’s Liberation Movement, and thought a great deal about myself, and about whether my problems were truly all women’s problems, and decided that some of them were and that some of them were not. My sexual rage was the most powerful single emotion of my life, and the feminist analysis has become for me, as I think it will for most women of my generation, as significant an intellectual tool as Marxism was for generations of radicals. But it does not answer every question... I would be lying if I said that my anger had taught me how to live. But my life has changed because of it. I think I am becoming in many small ways a woman who takes no shit. I am no longer submissive, no longer seductive...

Campbell introduces the two categories of substance and style early in her essay in order to analyze the movement. She uses the ideas throughout, carrying a compelling theme all the way through. However, these themes are in some ways objectionable and they do not cover all the canons of rhetoric. She acknowledges this when she revisits the essay in 1999. Campbell actually says that she rejects applying the canons of rhetoric to the movement in her introduction! I feel strongly that including them in the original essay would have given her arguments more merit.

Delivery

Campbell eschewed great success with her original essay. It is used as a model in many settings to teach people about the facets of social protest movements. Likewise, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has been cited numerous times in other works and essays. Foss even refers to her: “As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explained, neo-Aristotelianism excludes ‘all evaluations other than the speech’s potential for evoking intended response from an immediate, specified audience’ ” (Foss 27).

Campbell comes across as an “aggressor orator” who is a proponent of equal rights for women (Griffin 11). She certainly does not defend the institutions that have oppressed women. In her conclusion, she sums up “women’s

liberation rhetoric is a dialectic between discourses that deal with public, structural problems and the particularly

significant statements of personal experience and feeling which extend beyond the traditional boundaries of rhetorical acts” (Campbell, “Oxymoron” 180). I was bound by the tone and delivery that she used as an aggressor orator.

ASSESSING CAMPBELL’S EFFECTS

For Campbell, substance is not a reiteration of other social movements. Rather, feminist advocacy “unearths tensions woven deep into the fabric of our society and provokes an unusually intense and profound ‘rhetoric of moral conflict’ ” (Campbell, “Oxymoron” 172). This, she considers the substance of the movement and how it differs from other movements. Could one say that almost all controversial social movements are intense and profound, and that they are usually in conflict with society’s status quo? Does not every equality movement have substance that unearths deep tensions? In my commentary and conclusion, I will share answers to these questions.

Richard Gregg describes having “to defend one’s life style publicly is, by implication, to attack the life styles of others who adhere to dissimilar styles” (Gregg 54). For most involved in any social movement for equal rights (think African Americans or GLBT people), this would be an enlightening and empowering experience relieving tension and pain and propelling movements forward. It would seem that people who are involved in equality movements would experience gratifying self-revelations. Campbell describes her audience oppositely. “These events are difficult to explain without postulating a radical form of identification that permits such painful self-revelation” (Campbell, “Oxymoron” 179). When comparing women’s liberation to other equality movements, it would seem that as painful as the self-revelation may be, it would also be a relief and sharing of personal stories is an ideal way to secure an audience’s attention.

Herbert Simons concluded that movements “must attract, maintain, and mold followers into an efficiently organized unit” (Simons 37). Campbell’s early view is that followers of women’s liberation emphasize “personal exigencies and private, concrete experience, and its goal is frequently limited to particular, autonomous action by individuals” (Campbell, “Oxymoron” 179). She refers to the idea of “consciousness-raising”. While on one hand I agree with Campbell that women’s liberation is more deeply personal than certain other movements, on the other hand it is not. The fact also remains that large cohesive organizations like the Women’s Liberation Movement existed when she authored her first essay. Similarly, the women’s movement made inestimable political progress in the 1970’s considering the facts that abortion rights were won and women were no longer tethered to their husbands for almost all financial decisions or support. Much of Campbell’s work is founded on feminist essays and manifestos traded in a network and through activists (Campbell, “Revisited” 1). So we have more proof that there was an attraction of

followers to the movement from its earliest days and there was some cohesion, regardless of how loose of a network it may have been.

Campbell admits in her 1999 commentary that she “would emphasize even more strongly than I did the sense in which efforts for social change are fundamentally rhetorical.” Does that also mean they share rhetorical similarities? Recall the term “anti-rhetoric” that Campbell used; she sites the many ways that women’s liberation is different from other movements. Her first essay seems to completely overlook any similarities the women’s movement shares with other social protest movements. Another example from Simmons is that followers “must react to resistance generated by the larger structure” (Simmons 37). I believe that the women’s liberation movement was born out of resistance to the larger social structure and is a reaction to it, thus making it similar - not different - from other movements. Campbell sites other examples of resistance throughout her original essay. For example, she asks the question “What do women want?” (Campbell, “Oxymoron” 181). It would be fair to say this is a question asked in almost every prominent social movement for equal rights. What do African Americans want? What do GLBT people want? Asking these critical questions makes her organization of the original essay even more problematic.

PERSONAL COMMENTARY AND CONCLUSION

Campbell’s oxymoron essay awoke my senses to the women’s liberation movement as it relates to the symbolic rhetoric of other equality movements. If Campbell were to revisit her original essay today, I believe that she would revise her thoughts on anti-rhetoric again considering the strength the GLBT rights movement has gained and the similarities it shares with women’s liberation. She might see the similarities both movements share. The efforts for social change in the women’s movement and for GLBT equal rights contain fundamental symbolic rhetoric that can not be ignored. It is not “anti-rhetoric” like Campbell described. Reconsider the thought that we “must admit that this is not a society based on the value of equality or make the over assertion that” gay and lesbian people “are special or inferior beings who merit discriminatory treatment”. The idea applies equally to both movements. They are similar, not antithetical statements.

As a gay white male, Campbell’s arguments made an impact on my own ideology concerning equal rights. I volunteer with Equality Texas (formerly the Lesbian and Gay Rights Lobby of Texas.) I am also a founding member of my company’s global gay and lesbian affinity organization (Symantec 1). Campbell’s original essay and later commentary had an impact on me as a person, and it caused me to reflect on my own involvement in the GLBT equal rights movement. I no longer see the GLBT movement through my own rose colored glasses. I understand its rhetoric more broadly now.

My research of Campbell gives me a better understanding of how revealing my feelings and identity publicly has impacted the status quo. I also have proof of how the GLBT rights movement violates our society's reality structure and that a gap in legal rights and social practices in our society exists for GLBT people. Like the women's movement, the GLBT equal rights movement unearths some of the deepest tensions in our society. For GLBT people, the process of coming out publicly to friends, families, or coworkers can be painful but gratifying self-revelations equal to that of liberated women. As an "out" person, I also know how tension-relieving the process is, yet I continue to experience a profound denial of rights in our heterosexist society despite the many people who have revealed their true identities.

I realize now how being a gay white male myself – and for Campbell being the successful white woman that she is – may come across as an attack on those who do not identify with us. At the advent of the second wave of feminism, women were not supposed to experience the kind of professional success that Campbell did. Likewise and until very recently, gays and lesbians were not seen as people who contributed productively to society or people who form families or raise children. Further, when Campbell recognizes some of the deficiencies in her first essay, such that "as a white feminist, I focused attention on the rhetoric and the activists that spoke to my condition, ignoring those whose ethnicities and concerns were different", I began to realize my own short falls. I often view my participation in the gay rights movement from the eyes of a middle-class, middle-aged, gay white male. It would be helpful for me to get to know the stories of others who struggle for GLBT rights, such as senior GLBT people, GLBT people of different ethnicities, or trans-gendered people. Perhaps then I will be able to take off my rose colored glasses for good.

I strongly believe that 30 years from now our society will have made linear political progress for GLBT rights equivalent to what we have witnessed over the past four decades for women's rights. If I were writing an essay on gay rights, I would close with a compelling thought introduced in Campbell's original women's liberation essay. Suffice, I will close with that question now. Should marriage vows be revisited to accommodate same sex couples or should they just be disposed of all together?

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