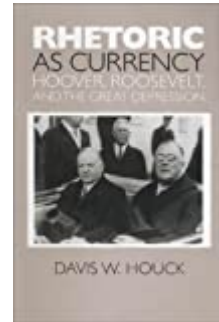




Davis W. Houck. *Rhetoric As Currency: Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Great Depression.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001. 226 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58544-109-9.



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When Dale Carnegie was President

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“People hang on Alan Greenspan’s every word, but these days they should listen to business executives like Earnest W. Deavenport and David E. Berges even more. The decisions they make are turning out to have more power to lift the economy, or keep it weak, than Mr. Greenspan’s control over interest rates. And for now, corporate executives are pulling back.”—*The New York Times*, May 14, 2001.

Davis Houck’s book, *Rhetoric as Currency*, may be regarded as timely. Given recent news, one would think that America’s “new economy” runs mostly on words. On television and in newspapers, we hear about Alan Greenspan’s “irrational exuberances” giving way to George Bush’s patriotic consumers defended by ‘Star Wars,’ while business executives scramble to issue company forecasts for boards and stockholders. In the media background, one can barely register noise over rising unemployment, energy shortages in California, protests over living wages at Harvard, and labor struggles at Delta Airlines. Actually, today’s news stories replay the culture of the Great Depression.

Houck is not a professional historian—he is an assistant professor of communication at Florida State University—but his close reading of presidential rhetoric reveals his sensitivity to historical context. To be sure, Houck’s story is about continuities rather than change over time. His main contribution is his analysis of the similarities between the late Hoover and early Roosevelt administrations—a continuity noted by New Dealers Raymond W. Moley and Rexford G. Tugwell, as well as by the historian Albert U. Romasco.[1] According to Houck, the connections were basically economic, but not in the traditional sense. He presents no figures of government policies moving in tandem with prices along Cartesian grids. So, economic comparisons of Gross National Product are missing here. His approach rejects that sort of economic science, which asserts its predictive power by naturalizing its object of discourse—self-bounded, utilitarian Man (p. 5).

Instead, Houck explains how both Hoover and Roosevelt appropriated the language of wages, consumption, and productivity to project national confidence through public utterances. “The act of shaping expectations,” he

writes, “about the economic future is, par excellence, the role of the rhetorician, particularly a person who can reach a ‘macroeconomic’ audience—the president, in other words” (p. 6). As a consequence, Houck discounts “time” as an independent variable of economics. I might comment here that “time” figures as the surplus value created when politicians buy public confidence with talk about expectations. Houck, however, would express my comment in different words: that the future is a political and cultural construct. Insofar as today’s news dwells on forecasts about national economic confidence then, we inhabit the temporal world constructed by Hoover and Roosevelt. Thus, the continuities multiply: there is the one between Hoover and Roosevelt and the one between their world and our own.

Though his analysis of continuities is interesting and sound, Houck focuses too narrowly on presidential discourse. Normally, this sort of criticism might seem out of bounds, because scholars are allowed to define their questions. But Houck had the opportunity to reflect both on the objects of his study—Hoover and Roosevelt—and the discipline of communications, in which he speaks as a subject. *Rhetoric as Currency* only hints at the connections between Hoover’s and Roosevelt’s speeches and their own contemporary culture of public speaking. Given that there are strong connections between the current academic discipline of “communications” and the older tradition of “public speaking,” it seems fair to criticize the book for being too narrow in its inquiry.[2]

As argued by Warren Susman in *Culture as History*,[3] the 1920s were a decade in which the culture of character—the obsession with individualism, manhood, and work – gave way to “personality” –the fascination with outer-directed, socially-adjusted, white-collar men. If there was any representative figure promoting this new self-image, it was the author of *Public Speaking: A Practical Course for Business Men* (1926), Dale Carnegie, whose stature as the salesman’s Salesman was unrivaled in his day. Houck should have explored more deeply how the culture of personality dominating WASP middle-class culture during the 1920s inspired both businessmen and politicians during the spiraling economic downturn of the 1930s. The book does not discuss Carnegie specifically, but it suggests that there were links between Depression-era public policy and the brand of public speaking that made Carnegie famous. A cultural historian seeking to take advantage of Houck’s work might re-label the 1920-1939 era as the Dale Carnegie administration.

For example, Herbert Hoover was never regarded as a good public speaker, but many of his fellow WASPs respected him as a model business manager who, after 1929, talked about efficiency in terms of psychological confidence. At a press conference held about a month after the October stock market crash, Hoover emphasized the normal operation of the country’s economic “system” while explaining that the crash meant “we are dealing here with a psychological situation to a very considerable degree. It is a question of fear” (p. 33). This statement was not isolated. Hoover increasingly associated words like fear, psychology, anxiety, with an older economic language of confidence to promote a politics of optimism. For Hoover, the Great Depression was a sort of clinical depression. His proposed therapy involved casting the American mind as a machine and fashioning himself as its engineer. Politicians could best serve the public, in Hoover’s words, “by taking counsel of [the people’s] charts, compass, and barometer, and by devotion to navigation and the boilers” (p. 41). And so, Hoover abandoned his earlier attempt at modeling the federal government as an efficient corporation and moved towards improvising legislation designed to re-establish public “confidence.” Houck writes: “The RFC, the Glass-Steagall Act, various bills expanding credit, revenue bills, the Emergency Relief and Construction Act—all were geared toward revitalizing the nation’s collective confidence” (p. 86). But according to Houck, Hoover too often followed his initiatives with silence, leaving himself vulnerable to attack.

As governor of New York, Franklin D. Roosevelt won friends and influenced people by consistently rehearsing the themes that Hoover had played since 1929. When he announced his campaign for the presidency, Roosevelt stressed limited government involvement in the economy and emphasized the duties of Americans to purchase their way into prosperity (p. 106). And he also echoed Hoover’s fears about fear. Roosevelt said during his campaign: “That a great fear has swept the country few can doubt. Normal times lull us into complacency— with the coming of economic stress we feel the disturbing hand of fear. This fear spreads to the entire country and with more or less unity we turn to our common government at Washington” (p. 120). Houck is reminding us that Roosevelt was the consummate pragmatist, playing his opponent’s game better than his opponent. What set Roosevelt apart from his Republican adversary was that he consistently presented himself as capable of overcoming adversity, in particular displaying his body as healthy, sociable, and self-confident. According to Houck, even

Roosevelt's gesture of taking a plane to the 1932 Democratic National Convention, which historians have interpreted as Roosevelt bucking tradition, might be seen as Roosevelt making a virtue of the physical limitations resulting from his bout with polio. Whereas he likely took that plane to make himself more comfortable, the press and others represented his actions as a sign of his confidence in himself, his nomination, and his program (pp. 124-25). In the end, Roosevelt won because his wit and charm gave a better shine to Hoover's policies.

Once elected, Roosevelt continued his pragmatism and pushed through his legislative agenda, which also incorporated the language of confidence. And again, Houck could have drawn more parallels between Roosevelt's rhetoric and other aspects of the New Deal. For instance, Houck interprets John Maynard Keynes's work as being consistent with what I would call Dale Carnegie's style. During the Depression, Keynes argued that poverty "comes from some failure in the immaterial devices of the mind, in the working of the motives which should lead to the decisions and acts of will, necessary to put in movement the resources and technical means we already have" (p. 2). For Keynes, government involvement in the economy was mainly about restoring psychological confidence by deficit spending, a policy that Roosevelt reluctantly followed after 1938. There are other connections, too. Legal historians may be interested to know that during the 1930s Columbia law professor and New Dealer Karl Llewellyn also talked about reforming the legal professional in terms similar to those used by Hoover and Roosevelt, though he did so in a self-reflexive

sociological voice.

Historians of politics and law will find *Rhetoric as Currency* a curious book. It tells us a good deal about the rhetorical echoes of Hoover in Roosevelt, but it unfortunately tells us a lot less about both Presidents' deeper debts to the culture of the 1920s. And this matters. For to see how Dale Carnegie was an important presence during the Great Depression is to be able to recognize his ghost in our political culture today.

NOTES

[1]. Albert U. Romasco, *The Poverty of Abundance: Hoover, the Nation, the Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); Albert U. Romasco, *The Politics of Recovery: Roosevelt's New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[2]. For a leading study, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[3]. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 271-290.

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