Motive of Materialism and Mysticism

Mario Savio’s Sit-in Adddress

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CONTEXT DESCRIBED

Tensions had been building for months between the students and administration at the University of California, Berkeley, during the Fall of 1964. On the afternoon of December 2, on the steps of Sproul Hall, Mario Savio, one of the leaders of the Free Speech Movement, gave a speech that ignited social consciousness in the form of a massive sit-in. The 1960s were ripe with political action, greatly characterized by the Civil Rights Movement. Savio was a graduate student on campus and a political activist, who had spent the summer helping African Americans register to vote in the South. Upon returning to Berkeley that Fall, the students were surprised to find out that the University Administration had passed a new ordinance banning all political advocacies on campus (Sual, 2010, p. 3). The denial of their first amendment rights created a huge upheaval and as the issue gained attention across the nation, the Free Speech Movement grew in numbers.

The FSM had gained support from many people, but there was still a great majority of people opposed to the FSM. The San Francisco Examiner quoted University President Kerr as saying, “…‘up to 40 percent of the hard-core leaders’ were adherents of the Moa-Red Chinese Communist line” (Montgomery, 1964, p. 1). The articles printed by The Examiner at this time linked leaders and members of the FSM to communist sympathizers or groups. The FSM had created quite a stir on the campus and the surrounding bay area. At the center of the movement was a fight against censorship and for 1st Amendment rights. This movement and the acts of civil disobedience that categorized it were all to ensure the protection of their rights as citizens.

TEXT DESCRIBED

Mario Savio’s sit-in address took an extemporaneous tone. He structured the speech in a problem-solution order by beginning with the points made by the last speaker. The previous speaker was “the nominal head of an organization supposedly representative of the undergraduates” (Savio, 1964, p. 1). Savio called this speaker “a strike breaker and a fink” (Savio, 1964, p. 1). Savio continued to outline the problem when he spoke about the unions, specifically those in charge. “I’ve tried to contact those unions. Unfortunately—and [it] tears my heart out—they’re as bureaucratized as the Administration. It is difficult to get through to anyone in authority there” (Savio, 1964, p. 1). The attempts to reach out to the union had been thwarted by red tape. Savio made the connection between the administration and a bureaucratic character. While this was represented as a problem, he invoked a tone of compassion towards the workers, stating, “there at least need be no…excessively hard feelings between the two groups” (Savio, 1964, p. 1). This compassion and nonviolent attitude is a key component of the FSM and part of the solution. This solution, Savio continued, is expressed in the two ways civil disobedience can occur: one is violating the unjust law until it has to be changed; the other is a refusal to participate at all.

Savio presented another problem of the situation, this time using a metaphor for industry to describe the university. He stated that the students were the raw material the university wished to shape and process, and which industry would purchase. He used parallelism to drive the point that they did not wish to participate in this way, “Well I ask you to consider—if this is a firm, and if the Board of Regents are the Board of Directors, and if President Kerr in fact is the manager, then I tell you something—the faculty are a bunch of employees and we’re the raw material! But we’re a bunch of raw material that don’t mean to be—have any process upon us. Don’t mean to be made into any product! Don’t mean--Don’t mean to end up being bought by some clients of the University…” (Savio, 1964, p. 1-2). Savio represented the administration as trying to produce a product out of the students. The solution for this problem was to stop the machine from running at all by having the demonstrations and refusing to participate in the arbitrary rules. Savio illustrated through the use of metaphor how civil disobedience would prevent the machine from running. Savio clarified that this does not mean they will be breaking anything, contrary to what may be interpreted “…by the bigots who run The Examiner” (Savio, 1964, p. 2).

Savio explained that they would be holding their own classes in Sproul Hall, in which topics they cared about would be taught, topics the university wished to censor: e.g. Un Chant d’ Amour, an Avant Guard French film, which a student group had been denied the right to show (Montgomery, 1964, p. 18). “We’re going to have real classes up there! They’re gonna be freedom schools conducted up there! We’re going to have classes on [the] first and fourteenth amendments!! We’re gonna spend our time learning about the things this University is afraid that we know!” (Savio, 1964, p. 2). Savio explained to his audience what this solution would look like: a lot like education in the form of civil disobedience.

ANALYSIS

The events that spurred Mario Savio’s speech were the limitations placed on students related to their political activity; the text is in direct response to and a violation of the rules placed on them by the administration. Savio used a problem/solution structure to highlight the problems facing the students and how the actions taken on behalf of the students served as the solution to the problem. The dramatic approach of this speech reads much like a story in which Savio tells how the university performs as an autocracy and what the students intend to do about it.

How the story works in the speech can be interpreted by the dramatic Burkeian search model. “Burke believed that all messages are essentially dramas. He created the pentad as a way to examine the dramatic elements present in messages that on their face don’t appear dramatic. By identifying the act, agent, agency, scene and purpose of a message, we start to see the component parts of the rhetorical event” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 219). Through this structure, we are better able to identify how these parts work together. The focus that Savio made is on the scene and purpose. While each component factors into the rhetorical event, from the text alone one can see that the focus was on setting the stage and describing the purpose of the performance.

Understanding this speech is dependent on a fair amount of knowledge about the context, including the events on campus as well as the political environment of the 1960s. “Featuring scene in discourse focuses attention on the material conditions of all involved—rhetor and audience” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 225). When a rhetorical act takes place focusing largely on the situation, the scene becomes a looking glass into what elements are in effect. Savio told the audience of the events that surrounded the sit-in. He talked about the strike breakers, the bureaucratic painters’ union, and the university’s attempts to mold the students into products. Savio took his audience through the events, “If President Kerr actually tried to get something more liberal out of the Regents in his telephone conversation, why didn’t he make some public statement to that effect? And the answer we received –from a well-meaning liberal—was the following: He said, ‘Would you ever imagine the manager of a firm making a statement publicly in opposition to his Board of Directors?’” (Savio, 1964, p. 1). He told a story of how the environment on the campus and the rules set forth by administration led to the demonstrations taking place. To fully understand the speech given by Savio, one must understand that the political climate at that time was changing; political awareness was growing and people were getting tired of being told what to do.

Savio chose to focus on the purpose of his agency through the act itself. The reasons for this movement played the greater role, leading the actors participating in it. Showcased in the problem/solution structure is the FSM’s purpose. “There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can’t take part! You can’t even passively take part! And you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon the apparatus—and you’ve got to make it stop!” (Savio, 1964, p. 2). Savio characterized the problem and used the metaphor of stopping the machine to demonstrate to the audience the solution: their purpose and the purpose of the movement. The metaphor is understood as the purpose for the audience because a “metaphor is both communicative stimulus and mental response. As stimulus, it is the identifying of an idea or object through a sign which generally denotes an entirely different idea or object. As, a response, it is an interaction of two thoughts” (Osborn & Ehninger, 2003, p. 226). The metaphor is an interaction of ideas, which represents a subject by an idea with which it is not commonly associated. By representing the administration as an industrial machine, he cast a new light on the administration. Savio needed the audience to have an interpretation of reality outside of that to which they were accustomed. The audience may not have ever associated the two ideas before. The administration was not literally a machine, but the use of metaphor created this reality for the audience to see. The scene, as highlighted by the examples of censorship, and the purpose, employed by his use of metaphor, shows the motivation of the rhetoric as seeking change.

INTREPRETATION

The 1960s were a time full of attempts to change the status quo. While Savio’s speech touched on only the limited conditions plaguing the UC Berkeley campus, it speaks to the much larger political climate. Burke’s model allows for a greater understanding of the motives behind this speech. “Burke suggests that an analyst can piece together motives for discourse by examining the text itself. What a person says gives indication of a person’s values…motives are traces of our philosophies” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 223). By looking at the text, one can start to discover what it is that rhetor values. The philosophies of Savio are indicated through the rhetorical choices he made in his speech. In the depiction of the scene, Savio created the problem as the administration and the “whole mode of arbitrary exercise of arbitrary power” (Savio, 1964, p. 1) in which the university was run. The denial of first amendment rights by the administration was an attempt to mold the students and to censor their ideas and voices. By depicting the prior events, there is a focus on the scene in which the speech took place. “A focus on scene, according to Burke, is associated with materialism. Materialism views the world as entirely composed of matter” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 225). Savio represented the administration as the scene and therefore the scene as the problem. The administration upheld a philosophy of materialism, trying to sell the students as products. The materialistic setting is what led the FSM to the purpose of the sit-in.

The purpose of Savio’s rhetoric was clearly intended to mobilize students. His message was founded in the philosophical idea of mysticism. “Mysticism maintains ‘that one can gain knowledge of reality that is not accessible to sense perception or to rational, conceptual thought’” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 225). Mysticism believes there is a reality beyond what one can see or touch, and this reality holds a much greater knowledge. Savio used metaphors to explain his version of the truth. He presented the purpose of the movement beyond what could be conceptualized. Savio was focused on freedom of speech, on a university and a world where knowledge was not censored. These ideas were not something that could be simply pointed to; they had to be illustrated, created into visual imagery. The future that the FSM sought was not part of their reality and the change was mystic in nature. The solution of civil disobedience is an attempt to change the scene of materialism and present a new one of mysticism.

Through the rhetoric, reality was shown in a way that was being ignored; it attempted to show the true motivations of the administration. These motivations can be looked at from a philosophical perspective, which the Burke model enables one to do. Savio used a metaphor to show the administration’s true colors. The metaphor showed how the university was being run just like a company with a direct intention to produce a product, a clear indicator of their materialism. Such a depiction of reality gives the audience a sense of injustice. The purpose of the university led the activists to their own purpose, to the purpose of the rhetoric. In a refusal to participate in this machine, the FSM must throws their bodies onto the gears and prevent it from operating. The metaphor of stopping this machine creates strong visual imagery, placing this reality into the minds of the audience. The mystic idealism that characterizes the purpose of the rhetoric points to a change where materialism is not prominent.

EVALUATION

Mario Savio’s audience was politically active and concerned with changing the status quo. With their interest already sparked by the Free Speech Movement, the rhetoric spoke directly to them. Along with other aspects, including the extemporaneous and dramatic style, this knowledge of involvement made the speech effective. While Savio’s style mimicked what his immediate audience was used to, it was clearly not a style with which the greater public was familiar. By defining the problem at hand as the materialism of the university, Savio was able to link the scene to the purpose of this civil disobedience for the larger audience. His way of presenting the problem and then stating the solution tell a story everyone can understand. The examples of materialism emphasized the administration’s aversion to the value of first amendment rights. This value lining up with the greater populations’ gave the FSM more ground to stand on in their eyes. The civil disobedience was in direct alliance with a value the American public upheld. While they may not have been familiar with the style of rhetoric, showing commonality in values created likeness with those who may have originally been against the movement, including those reading The Examiner. The use of metaphors to show reality in a way that was not accessible through sense perception gave the entire audience a sense of what the situation had really become and what their advocacy was attempting to accomplish. The sit in on the steps of Sproul Hall demonstrated that the FSM was upholding traditional values of freedom, while the attempts to shut them up by the University administration demonstrated their denial of innovation and change.

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