

INSURGENT RHETORICS AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

MIKE EDWARDS

Consider two juxtaposed moments. First, the climax of China Miéville's 2004 science fiction novel *Iron Council*, wherein the titular insurgent train is frozen in time as an eternal monument to coming revolution in its voyage toward the armed forces of a hegemon metropolis, with this fictional moment owing an ideological debt to the historical materialist writings of Karl Marx: "The perpetual train," the socialist Miéville writes in this novel themed around war, labor, and imperialism; "The Iron Council itself. The renegade, returned, or returning and now waiting. Absolutely still. . . . The train, its moment indurate."¹ Second, the 2006 publication of the US Army's *Field Manual 3–24 on Counterinsurgency* (FM 3–24),² a document that updated and historicized military counterinsurgency doctrine with insights from scholarship in sociology and anthropology but had the citations for those insights excised in the production process prior to publication.³

Those two juxtaposed moments embody the widely differing digital rhetorical tactics and strategies of the US military and its declared insurgent opponents in the evolution from President Bush's "global war on terror" to President Obama's "targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists" to President Trump's rhetoric opposing "radical Islamic terrorism."⁴ This chapter examines two sets of doctrinal documents concerned with and embodying the digital rhetorical strategies of those two groups—the US military and its declared insurgent opponents—in order to raise questions about the nature and consequences of the profound difference in those strategies. Those strategies are metonymically represented in the example that opens this chapter. In FM 3–24, the US Army attempted to historicize its doctrine toward counterinsurgency, only to have those attempts stripped of citations and historical context in favor of a dehistoricized and instrumental present- and future-focused attempt on tactics of winning hearts and minds. In *Iron Council* the frozen train is a reminder of the material accumulation of

historical labor and resources committed to the revolutionary effort, providing a strategic horizon toward which future revolutionaries might continue to strive.

These tendencies—one a hegemonic dehistoricized instrumentalism, the other a revolutionary historical materialism—are visible in the rhetorics that Western media use to characterize the conflicts between the US government and the variously described insurgent or terrorist targets of its military operations, and particularly in the motivations that Western media ascribe to groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Al Qaeda. The *Washington Post* reporter Jim Tankersley, for example, paraphrases a November 24, 2015, argument from the economist Thomas Piketty that “inequality is a major driver of Middle Eastern terrorism . . . and Western nations have themselves largely to blame for that inequality,” pointing to a historical economic circumstance as one significant driver of terrorist activity, to the point where “the Middle East’s political and social system has been made fragile by the high concentration of oil wealth into a few countries with relatively little population. . . . Those economic conditions . . . have become justifications for jihadists.”⁵

Other authors refuse such historicizing rationales. The *Quartz* blogger Tim Fernholtz argues against Piketty, citing empirical studies by the economist Alan Krueger to “suggest that poverty and inequality aren’t behind terror attacks.”⁶ Fernholtz points to Piketty’s observation “that Middle East economies with high inequality are typically the semi-or-outright authoritarian regimes backed by the West, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the Gulf States” in order to acknowledge that “inequality is a very real factor in these corrupt countries, but so too are crackdowns on civil liberties and political participation. The studies cited here find that terrorism has a significantly tighter correlation to states without functioning political processes (due mainly to dictators or political collapse) than to poverty. The linkages Piketty sees between terrorists and Western foreign policy in the Middle East may very well exist, not just because it has led to economic disparities but because it has contributed to the political dysfunction that appears to drive radicalization.”⁷ While one may acknowledge the overdetermined nature of motivations for terrorism, the way Fernholtz broadly characterizes Middle Eastern countries as politically nonfunctional or dysfunctional is an Orientalist rhetorical move characteristic of colonial perspectives.

Such an Orientalist move permits its authors and audiences to perceive the motivations of groups from whom terrorist and insurgent activities emerge as simply an existing evil, requiring obliteration rather than attention or rhetorical response. The rhetorical move on the part of the West, then, becomes a

hegemonic dehistoricized instrumentalism: destroy the enemy and their rhetorical capability, using the tools presently available to hand. Terrorism relies on the same strategy, but in the rhetorics associated with terrorist movements, there is also a more complex revolutionary historical materialism, an ideological mode most often associated with Marxism, proposing that the material aspects of history related to producing and reproducing the conditions of existence fundamentally affect all aspects of a society's development, including its politics and culture.

We can see both those tendencies—toward hegemonic dehistoricized instrumentalism and toward revolutionary historical materialism—on display in two sets of documents associated with the United States and its insurgent opponents. On the one hand, the US military publications examined later in this chapter outline sets of digital practices (rhetorical and otherwise) for US forces to undertake to gain a tactical and strategic upper hand in combating global extremism and insurgency. On the other hand, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's magazine *Inspire*⁸ and the magazine *Dabiq*,⁹ published by ISIL, both depict long-standing global traditions of oppression and inequality and in response advocate for tactics of terror and assassination while offering historicized rationales for the long-term rhetorical and material legitimacy of their movements.

The US military presents its rhetorical operations as either information consumption (intelligence) or information production and distribution (the combination of psyops, public affairs, and strategic communications now termed *military information support operations*) taking place in the continuous present-time rhetorical battlespace. Such an ahistorical orientation is visible in the military documents examined later in this chapter, and stands in contrast to the material-historical arguments represented with carefully attuned cross-cultural rhetorical appeals in *Inspire* and *Dabiq*. Analysis of the digital rhetorics on display in *Inspire* and *Dabiq* suggests an awareness that rhetorical labor aggregates over time—historically and materially—into circulating rhetorical capital. In working toward peace, digital-rhetorical strategies in arenas of global conflict might seek to combine cross-cultural rhetorical listening and postcolonial rhetorical perspectives with a deeper awareness of the economic, intellectual, and historical-material foundations of those arenas of conflict.

The US military's investment in a dehistoricized and instrumentalist rhetoric is itself part of a broader Western cultural turn observed by James Arnt Aune, who describes a historical progression in which economic changes resulted in the classical hierarchies associated with connections between individual expression and community values being superseded by more modern

hierarchies associated with emerging technologies of communication and circulation and their links to “how discourse functions as power” in market economies.¹⁰ Some instances of military rhetoric have attempted to acknowledge this phenomenon, as noted above in regard to *FM 3–24*, and as illustrated by Colin Gray’s observation in a US Army War College publication that “the United States waged war (in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq) with too little effort being devoted to the whole narrative and context of conflict.”¹¹ That attention to material and historical context, on the other hand, is characteristic of the rhetorical endeavors represented in *Dabiq* and *Inspire*.

In Marx’s formulation of the materialist conception of history, “the mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life.”¹² It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.¹³ In other words, we can only understand the present by viewing it through its material conditions and the history of those conditions, and our political, cultural, and social lives are tied to the relations of production and material relations particular to our cultures and lived histories. However, those who refuse such formulations, particularly in Western hegemonic cultures, have the rhetorical luxury of perceiving themselves as natural and beyond question—the default.

Therein we see an answer to the question posed by Raka Shome: “How do Western rhetorical discursive practices, in their representation of the world and of themselves, legitimize the contemporary global power structures?”¹⁴ Shome’s essay later offers its own answers, observing “that while other kinds of analyses were done on George Bush’s Gulf War rhetoric, there were hardly any analyses of how the U.S. rhetoric on the Gulf War constructed the Middle Eastern people (and different Muslim cultures) as uncivilized and immoral, and always already inclined towards barbaric terrorist activities”¹⁵—not only uncivilized but premodern, embedded in a backward past. Ulrich Beck observes a similar tendency serving instrumental ends, noting that “terrorist enemy images are *deterritorialized, de-nationalized and flexible state constructions that legitimize the global intervention of military powers as ‘self-defence.’*”¹⁶ In other words, according to the Western representations investigated by Beck and Shome, terrorism comes from a place beyond and prior to that of the modern nation and its borders and strategies.

Despite or perhaps because of such a circumstance, contemporary military doctrine suggests that Information Age terrorism—particularly in the circulation of its rhetorical operations—must be met by abstracted and ahistorical tactics. Those tactics often operate in the gray areas between *ratio* and *elocutio*; between the closed fist of reason and the open hand of persuasion;

between what the army terms the kinetic and the cognitive domains. On the more rhetorical side, the advice offered by the army in its *Social Media Handbook* is fairly innocuous, although representative in its synchronous and instrumental positioning of rhetorical context: “As communicators, we operate in a 24-hour news cycle with the news moving faster than ever before. . . . As communicators, we need to be the first with the truth, whether it’s good or bad. Social media allows us to do that. . . . In today’s media environment, understanding social media, especially as it relates to time, can help you excel as an Army communicator.”¹⁷ A similar attention to what Ridolfo and DeVoss have described as “rhetorical velocity”¹⁸ is visible in an assertion from the US Army War College that “the United States is buffeted by hostile, inhospitable, or uncertain networks, movements, and/or environmental disturbances manifesting as organized and purposeful resistance (e.g., Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS] and Al Qaeda) on the one hand and leaderless instability (e.g., Arab Spring) on the other. The former threatens core US interests and enduring defense objectives directly, the latter by implication. All are part of a generalized disintegration of traditional authority structures . . . , fueled and/or accelerated by hyperconnectivity.”¹⁹ In these observations, we see military authors at least aware of the kairotic components of the rhetorical situations they address, particularly as they address delivery in digital contexts.

Those digital contexts have changed the military’s perception of its rhetorical approaches and its attitudes toward those approaches. Prior to the broad adoption of internet-based communication technologies, the military saw its rhetorical roles as existing either in public affairs (communicating in a reasonably straightforward manner to largely friendly audiences) or psychological operations (PSYOPS, or propaganda and other tools aimed at hostile audiences). In the “hyperconnectivity” of the Information Age, however, “largely free-riding on the back of a metastasizing global cyber superstructure, [terrorist] actors are increasingly weaponizing information, disinformation, and popular disaffection in order to by-pass the traditional defenses of target states and institutions.”²⁰ When deployed by nonterrorist or friendly forces, such approaches are termed Information Operations (IO) or Military Information Support Operations (MISO).²¹ These tactics are readily recognizable as rhetorical, as evidenced by some of the “examples of joint military information support operations activities” provided by a joint chiefs of staff MISO publication:

Modify the behavior of selected target audiences toward US and multinational capabilities . . .

Promote the ability of the host nation to defend itself against . . . insurgencies and terrorism by . . . encouraging empathy between host nation armed forces and the civilian populace . . .

- Mobilize support for US and multinational military operations . . .
- Gain and sustain popular belief in and support for US and multinational political systems . . .
- Attack the legitimacy and credibility of the adversary political systems . . .
- Shift the loyalty of adversary forces and their supporters to the friendly powers . . .
- Arouse foreign public opinion or political pressures for, or against, a military operation . . .
- Undermine confidence in the adversary leadership . . .
- Counter hostile information activities . . . ²²

However, it should be emphasized that the military considers such rhetorical tactics only a subset of what it terms IO or MISO. The US Army War College *Information Operations Primer* states that “Information Operations seek to influence the behavior of target audiences by changing their ability to make decisions, while simultaneously defending the friendly capability to make proper decisions. This is no different from the exercise of the other forms of national power. In this instance the means is information, but the resulting outcome is the same. . . . While frequently referred to as ‘soft-power’ or ‘non-kinetic,’ IO includes the use of physical attack against adversary information systems or directly against decision makers.”²³ Here, then, is the transition from the open hand to the closed fist; from the cognitive domain to the kinetic—and the blur between the two.

Some military authors acknowledge these complexities. The authors of *FM 3-24* rejected the input of US military personnel who argued that the manual did not go far enough to “out-terrorize the terrorists.”²⁴ Similarly, the authors of the *Primer*—in working to untangle the nonequivalencies of the dichotomies between “kinetic” and “non-kinetic” weapons and “lethal” and “nonlethal” effects—observe that “what gives a PSYOP capability its effect is careful selection of a convincing message that gains access to the logic or emotions in the mind of the target. Application of kinetic weapons requires only physical access to the target.”²⁵ Terrorists and generals alike understand that bombs have PSYOP effects and thus could be considered ultimately persuasive, though such definition might seem problematic to rhetorical scholars. The *Cyber Warfare Lexicon* acknowledges further terminological difficulties as well, noting that “terms associated with traditional weapons are based on the assumption of materiel or personnel as the target and damage as the effect. Materiel is defined as the ‘equipment, apparatus, and supplies used by an organization.’ Although this description could cover adversary computer networks, it would be a linguistic stretch to say that the information on those networks is also materiel. Since cyber targets are very often non-materiel, and

since cyber weapons can create non-damage effects, it stands to reason that the language of traditional munitions will be inadequate if we try to force it to cover offensive and defensive cyber operations.”²⁶

At the same time, recent accounts of actions carried out in Iraq and Afghanistan detail lethal kinetic attacks against personnel as a component of information operations intended to degrade enemy infrastructures and networks of rhetorical circulation and delivery, raising further questions for rhetorical studies about the division between the open hand and the closed fist. Sean Naylor’s history of the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) describes the post-9/11 growth of the Computer Network Operations Squadron (CNOS) as an aspect of JSOC dedicated to kinetic cyber operations—killing insurgents who constituted the human networks of rhetorical and informational delivery.²⁷ According to Naylor, “a strike force would hit a house based on signals intelligence that there was a cell phone linked to an insurgent leader inside. Once the strike force found the phone, analysts would load its contents into computers. . . . The NSA had built a query that alerted it whenever the same username and password information were entered in different countries . . . allowing [US operatives] to upload software onto computers in Mosul’s Internet cafés that would alert them whenever someone typed in one of these username and password combinations. Analysts soon knew that they were tracking a senior Al Qaeda leader in Iraq from the contents of one of the accounts.”²⁸ The human networks of rhetorical distribution through which these insurgent cell phone and email networks were connected were simultaneously infrastructural and social, requiring a history of interpersonal trust and individual rhetorical transactions built up over time: in other words, history.

One role of rhetorical activity can be to attempt to establish that history. While the US military is demonstrably uninterested in such rhetorical purposes, the insurgent publications *Dabiq* and *Inspire* pursue them in interesting ways. According to its first 2014 issue, dated 1435 in the Hijri calendar, the English-language *Dabiq* is concerned primarily with matters of theology, to include encouragements for migration (*hijrah*) and community (*jama’ah*) in service of the issue’s theme, “The Return of Khilafah” (the Caliphate).²⁹ The ISIL authors assert, for example, that “the Islamic State has an extensive history of building relations with the tribes within its borders in an effort to strengthen the ranks of the Muslims, unite them under one imam, and work together towards the establishment of the prophetic Khilafah”³⁰ and justify their arguments through the use of references to the Hadith and Quran, to recent speeches by religious leaders, and to thematic and metaphorical connections between contemporary events and historical examples. Such rhetoric is recognizable to Western eyes both in its content—a conservative valorization

of an imagined past golden age and wish for its return—and in its form, with a well-designed and consistent visual identity, striking and attractive layout and typography, and skilled and dramatic use of color and original and stock photography.

The form of the Al Qaeda magazine *Inspire* is similarly polished in its visual appearance. Like *Dabiq*, it was published as a full-color PDF for English-language audiences. Using methods primarily associated with digital technologies in the first and subsequent issues, the editors and authors use drop shadows, textured backgrounds, metallic or reflective or otherwise seemingly three-dimensional effects on text, page layout and typographic effects, carefully chosen stock and news photography and imagery, and sophisticated alphabetic effects including the Unicode ligature for the calligraphic character for the Arabic honorific *jalla jalalahu* (“may his glory be glorified”) after every use of the name of God.³¹

They combine these digital methods with sophisticated rhetorical appeals: one op-ed style article by Shaykh Usama Bin Ladin cites James E. Hansen’s 1988 Congressional testimony during Hansen’s time working for NASA on the dangers of global climate change in order to make an argument about global warming, economic inequality, and the subsequent increasing radicalization of the Islamic world, while at the same time invoking religious texts, thereby linking recent Western events to arguments from the shared history of Islam.³² A section on “Open Source Jihad”³³ includes instructions on “How to Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom” and instructions on how to send and receive secure communications email using the “Asrar al-Mujahideen 2.0” email encryption application. The magazine references figures, debates, and rhetorical topoi prominent in the contemporary media throughout, while also linking them to historical examples, as with Anwar al-Awlaki’s contention regarding the perceived European cartoonists’ slanders of the prophet Muhammad that “if you have the right to slander the Messenger of Allah, we have the right to defend him. If it is part of your freedom of speech to defame Muhammad it is part of our religion to fight you.”³⁴

Unlike *Dabiq*, however, *Inspire*’s rhetorical purposes extend beyond historical justification in disturbing ways, to the point of having murderous consequences. One example: the instructions in the “How to Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom” section are thought to have been used by the Tsarnaev brothers to manufacture the pressure-cooker bombs used in the April 2013 Boston Marathon terror attack.³⁵ A second example: *Inspire* invokes the French newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*’s publication of cartoons mocking the prophet Muhammad as a contributing factor to its publication of a kill list of public figures associated with the cartoons, a public argument that

may have contributed to the shootings at the newspaper's offices in Paris on January 7, 2015.³⁶ The form and substance of the magazine's arguments and delivery function as technologies of attention—as contributors to its rhetorical velocity—and so help to incline some who encounter it in various contexts to perform the attentional labor required for the magazine's distribution, use, and reproduction, and perhaps also helped to incline some of its readers to intervene in the formation of history themselves. Again, the line between the open hand and the closed fist is blurred, both in the arguments made by the magazine and by the terrorist acts its arguments may have inspired. *Inspire* cannot be fully understood simply as a synchronic moment of competing and conflicting cultural values among which its multiple audiences must choose, but requires a more complete historical understanding of its material contexts.

Bo Wang paraphrases the 2009 suggestion made by Sue Hum and Arabella Lyon³⁷ “that a comparative historicized approach that attends to moments, texts, and political situations within and across cultures would allow us to foster a dialogical engagement with other rhetorics.”³⁸ Such a comparative approach might suggest that the blurring of the line between the open hand of rhetoric and the closed fist of force that occurs in rhetorical operations is itself a cross-cultural phenomenon. The explicit attention to history in the Al Qaeda and ISIL documents is Miéville's revolutionary train: “Years might pass and we will tell the story of the Iron Council and how it was made, how it made itself and went, and how it came back, and is coming, is still coming.”³⁹ Samir Khan, *Inspire*'s editor, and Anwar al-Awlaki, one of the magazine's authors, were both US citizens. They were killed by a US drone strike in Yemen on September 30, 2011. In such operations and their historical and rhetorical antecedents, is there a place for Krista Ratcliffe's “ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while simultaneously questioning that which we deem fair and just”?⁴⁰

NOTES

1. Miéville, *Iron Council*, 542.

2. US Army, *Field Manual* 3–24.

3. Edwards, *Postcapitalist Economics and Technologies of Composition*.

4. All three phrases have been used widely by their authors in multiple contexts.

5. Tankersley, “This Might Be the Most Controversial Theory.”

6. Fernholtz, “Poverty in the Middle East.”

7. Fernholtz.

8. Khan, *Inspire* 1, 2010.

9. *Dabiq* 1, 2014.

10. Aune, “Historical Materialist Theory of Rhetoric,” paragraph 4. It bears noting here that scholarship in the field of Islamic economics frequently represents such economic systems as

neither capitalist nor socialist due in part to the economically significant ways *riba* (usury) and *zakat* (alms) are governed within such systems.

11. Gray, *What Should the U.S. Army Learn from History?* 10.
12. Some translators here prefer “intellectual.”
13. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 11–12.
14. Shome, “Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon,” 558–71, 559.
15. Shome, 564.
16. Beck, “Terrorist Threat,” 39–55, 44; emphasis in original.
17. US Army, *Social Media Handbook*, ii.
18. Ridolfo and DeVoss, “Composing for Recomposition.”
19. Freier, Bado, Bolan, Hume, and Lissner, *At Our Own Peril*, 59.
20. Freier et al., *At Our Own Peril*, 55.
21. Some documents relating to IO and MISO, like the US Army’s 2013 *Field Manual* 3–53, while not classified as Secret, are unavailable to civilians. Others, like the US Department of Defense’s 2013 *Instruction on Human Intelligence* are classified as SECRET and the copy I obtained was so heavily redacted as to provide no usable information.
22. US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication* 3–13.2, iv–8.
23. US Army War College Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations, *Information Operations Primer*, 44.
24. Edwards, *Postcapitalist Economics and Technologies of Composition*.
25. US Army War College Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations, *Information Operations Primer*, 5.
26. USSTRATCOM, *Cyber Warfare Lexicon*, 5.
27. Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 261.
28. Naylor, 344–45.
29. *Dabiq* 1, 2014.
30. *Dabiq*, 12.
31. Khan, *Inspire* 1, 2010.
32. Khan, 8–9.
33. Khan, 31–47.
34. Khan, 26.
35. Khan, 33–40.
36. Khan, 24.
37. Hum and Lyon, “Recent Advances in Comparative Rhetoric,” 162.
38. Wang, “Rethinking Feminist Rhetoric and Historiography,” 32.
39. Miéville, *Iron Council*, 564.
40. Ratcliffe, “Rhetorical Listening,” 203.

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