THE BRIDGE OVER SEPARATED LANDS

Kenneth Burke’s significance for the study of social action

Among his many talents, Kenneth Burke is a master of the oxymoron, that figure of speech which unites incongruous or contradictory terms. I think he would regard “social science” as an example of the oxymoron. The concept of the “social”, inherently a human, dramatic form of action, is coupled with “science”, a method most successfully used with inanimate objects, animals, and the animality in humans. The resulting term must seem to him both comedic and contradictory.

Burke has had a persistent, even though limited, impact on social scientists. While he has yet to be given recognition as a major sociological “theorist”, for some of us he has played that role for several decades. In anthropology, sociology, and political science he has deeply influenced a number of scholars and their studies. In the past decade, the emergence of several movements in both social science and literary criticism has given Burke’s thought increased importance. Structuralism, linguistic analysis, critical theory, symbolic anthropology, and cognitive sociology have all focused the gaze of sociologists on modes of presentation and interpretation and on the central importance of language to human action. Burke’s dramatism and dialectical method, developed in the 1930s and 1940s, seem suddenly to be in crowded company.

Why Burke? To judge by the audience of his readers he has been primarily viewed as a literary critic. With some exceptions, including the very important one of Hugh Dalziel Duncan, there have been few major commentaries on Burke by social scientists. A number of
us have made use of Burkean concepts and methods in empirical research, as will be described in this paper. In general, social scientists have shown small interest in literary criticism, regarding critics as an intriguing breed, necessary to any self-respecting intellectual community, and fun to read, but hardly the sort to teach one’s daughter or welcome as members of one’s own department. Why Burke? What is there in Kenneth Burke that should make his work so significant for the social scientist?

Distinctions between science and art and between literature and sociology are deeply entrenched in modern thought. These distinctions have also served to keep content separated from form. Until quite recently the linguistic and cognitive categories that we use to express and communicate have been viewed as the provinces of art. Imagination and rhetoric have been regarded as jurisdictions of literature. Sociology described life in “realistic”, not imaginative terms. By this view, human beings are chiefly utilitarian creatures guided by material interests or nonlogical people whose atavistic sentiments motivate actions. Thus, the symbols of the artist were assumed to be pertinent only to the special realms of the aesthetic, religious, and mystical sides of life.

Burke has effectively undermined these distinctions. What I find so vital in Burke’s writings is the recognition of unity between art and human action which constitutes the bridge between sociology and literature. Both are necessarily involved in the use of language to describe and interpret human action. Both can be seen as strategies operating within and upon situations and audiences and, thus, as necessarily rhetorical. Of imaginative literature Burke has shown that it is a form of communication, something that takes place between writer and readers, and that it is strategic or rhetorical in the sense that it must order and encompass situations in ways that make sense to readers. Moreover, just as imaginative works may be said to have a sociological side, so life itself may be understood dramatistically, as though it were a literary text.

Burke is perhaps the preeminent pioneer in what Clifford Geertz has characterized as the “blurring of genres”, a blurring in which the lines between the social sciences and the humanities are becoming less distinct and more permeable. But Burke is much more than a pioneer, who may may be remembered on ceremonial occasions but need not be read. I find in the corpus of his work a detailed approach to the interpretation of human action and to the analysis of the terminologies of such interpretations in use in the social sciences. Because Burke insists on the paramount importance of language and symbolism in framing and defining the experiences of our world, he may be seen as a precursor of the contemporary emphasis in the social sciences on cultural forms in the construction of reality, including social structure itself. He brings to these perspectives the approach of the literary analyst. For Burke, drama is not simply a useful metaphor for describing human action. It is a literal description of what we do in social acts. This is why the two domains of literature and social science can be mutually fertilizing.

To be more precise I want to suggest four aspects of Burke’s thought that have an impact on sociology and the social sciences:
1. An understanding of language as a form of action. The assertion here is that the modes of symbolizing experience are a central part of human behavior. Symbolic representations constitute the ways in which experience is made possible, and different forms of symbolic usage create different experiences. Action responds to meanings of situations, and those meanings are reflections of the language frames we use.

2. An understanding of human action as dramatic in form and, consequently, as amenable to analysis in the same framework as literary work. Burke's emphasis is on the performative character of much of human action and communication as well as the ritualistic and symbolic nature of much human interaction and institutional forms.

3. An understanding of human actions as rhetorical; as strategies developed to cope with situations involving a performer and an audience.

4. A program for analysis of human behavior which is pluralistic and dialectical. In its focus on the partial character of perspectives, Burke's method emphasizes the values of dialogue among diverse perspectives and the unities that exist across the boundaries of the social sciences and the humanities.

Anyone who reads much of Burke knows both the frustration and the joy of experiencing a writer who seems at first and even at third reading to lack organization, system, and all those good things we were led in Freshman Composition to believe were essential to coherent writing. Knowing where to begin in Burke is often, for the novitiate, a genuine problem. But first and even third impressions are misleading. Methinks there is much method in his madness. There is a definite system of thought in Burke's word, and while it has broadened over the years, it has remained quite consistent.

Language as Action

It is as a theorist of language that Burke's major contribution to sociology must be seen. His is an exhortation to take language seriously and a demonstration of what that means. As in so much of Burke, form cannot be separated from content. On the first page of his Philosophy of Literary Form (PLF) he points out that if you know that a man said "Yes", you still do not know what was said unless you know what preceded the "Yes" and to what situation his word was addressed. The terms we use are ways of naming and sizing up the situations to which we address ourselves.

I will begin with the subject matter of much of Burke's work: the nature of human beings. His view is expressed most saliently in his paper "Dramatism" in the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (ESS), Burke's sole contribution to a social science publication, and in the chapter "Definition of Man" in Language as Symbolic Action (LSA). In the latter essay he presents a definition which is, in many ways a precis of his viewpoint:
"Man is the symbol using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order) and rotten with perfection".

**Animal motion and human action**

Human beings are animals, but they are symbol-using animals. Here Burke is squarely in a tradition that exists in the social sciences that includes Dilthey and Weber, George Herbert Mead and the Symbolic Interactionists, and the more recent influences of Alfred Schutz, the ethnomethodologists, and the renaissance of the Idealist view of how knowledge is achieved or constructed. Where human beings differ from animals is the extent of their capacity to communicate through language and to depict and understand the world by symbolizing or placing meaning upon objects and events. Animals may be able to communicate and may even be able to reflect upon their movements, but they cannot communicate their reflections.

The implications of this for the study of human beings are enormous. Because human beings can and do affix meanings to events, the methods of the physical science cannot be drawn lock, stock, and laboratory into the social sciences. If the event or object to which human beings respond is one constructed by the actors, without knowing the meanings in use the sociologist or psychologist has only a partial image of humans. He or she sees them as passive beings reacting mechanistically to external conditions. They move but they do not act. Action implies those qualities by which humans assess one another and reflect upon their interests, purposes, and emotions. Human action is never certain or wholly predictable.

This is clear in Burke’s frequent attack on behavioristic psychology for using as its “representative anecdote” an image of man inappropriate to much of human action. Its laboratory experiments place humans in atypical conditions to which they respond in atypical ways. Attempts to generalize from them are also necessarily flawed. They reduce human action to animal motion:

"The behaviorist uses his experiments with the conditioned reflex as the anecdote about which to form his vocabulary for the discussion of human motives; but this anecdote, though notably informative, is not representative, since one cannot find a representative case of human motivation in animals if only because animals lack that property of linguistic rationalization which is so typical of human motives" (A Grammar of Motives [GM], p. 59).

**Symbolic action**

Human action is distinguished from animal motion by virtue of its symbolic character. For Burke, language is very much more than a means of pointing to referents. How we talk about things, how we name them, how we think about them and about ourselves, and how we tell
others what we think are all shaped by language and by our own actions as symbol-using animals. In his essay "Terministic Screens" Burke quotes approvingly the definition of "Dramatism" in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*: "a technique of analysis of language and thought as basically modes of action rather than as means of conveying information" (*LSA*, p. 54).

Duncan comments that what we say about what we do is a much fact as what we do. This being so, a study of how we think about objects, events, and persons, and how we cast these in language and other symbolic forms, is an essential part of the study of human life. When we talk, write, wear clothes, eat foods, make love, make war, and perform the many acts of daily life we give expression to our perception of ourselves, of others, and of the world around us. We define the situations in which we act and state our relation to them — in clothing, hairstyle, and argot. The "punk rocker" is making a statement about his or her view of social authority and the response he or she has chosen to it just as clearly as the judge whose language and robes present images of authority and neutrality. Says Burke: "These strategies size up the situations, name their structures and outstanding ingredients and name them in a way that contains an attitude toward them" (*PLF*, p. 4).

Burke's distinction between semantic and poetic meaning is a good place to see how symbolizing properties of language prevent the exclusive use of a scientific language after the fashion of physics, biology, or mathematics (*PLF*, pp. 121-44). Semantic meaning, which he equates with the scientific use of language, is analytic. It distinguishes and defines, aiming at clarity through placing things in distinct and exclusive categories. As Burke so charmingly puts it, the aim of semantic meaning is to give the name and address of every event in the universe. Poetic meaning utilizes the multiplicity of meanings that a given act can have. Semantically, the expression "New York City is in Iowa" is nonsense. But when we contemplate the extension of cultural influence across the nation, the statement makes sense. "As a metaphor, it provides valid insight. To have ruled it out by strict semantic authority would have been vandalism" (*PLF*, p. 126). It is his recognition of the ambiguities and multiplicities inherent in human action that makes Burke's critique of conventional positivism in social science so powerful.

What this implies is the autonomy of symbolic action as distinguished from instrumental, utilitarian activity. The judge's language and robes create the legal institution as much as does the preexistent office. What is expressed through the clothing, rituals, and material props of the courtroom is a conception of public authority. Whatever the forms of legal actions and sentencing, the symbolism provides an experience of being in the presence of legitimate and communal authority, and not of a particular person with his or her own personal likes and dislikes. The experience created by such symbols is a significant part of the legal institution often overlooked by sociologists.

One of the ways in which this insight has influenced social scientists is found both in my own work on law and in that of the political scientist Murray Edelman. My studies of the American Temperance Movement and of the public problem of drinking-driving start with a
concern for the meanings expressed and symbolized in legislation. I do not assume that legislation is primarily or only a means to and end, to limit drinking or to achieve auto safety. In the case of Temperance and Prohibition the legislative and legal acts are expressions of the relative status and cultural dominance of the Protestant, rural, middle-class American in conflict with the Catholic, urban, and largely working-class elements of the late nineteenth century. In Edelman’s work, such acts as voting or the bargaining processes in labor-management relations are interpreted as modes of quiescence. They are dramatic representations of forms of participation only tangentially related to the utilitarian processes of governmental action or labor union decision-making. Where Burke has influenced both of us is in perceiving actions as expressive and communicative and seeing in such expressions a characteristic form of institutional operation.

A clear use of the same idea is seen in Peter Manning’s study of the social organization of British and American police, a study explicitly influenced by his reading of Burke. Manning was interested in the ways in which police work is presented to the public, the strategies by which police obtain the necessary mandates for their authority. The “police myth”, as he called it, is that of the policeman as crime fighter. A close analysis of the police showed that much of their activity was not that of preventing crime or of apprehending criminals; indeed, said Manning, there is not much that police can do about crimes. The gathering and publication of crime rates, the many events and rituals depicting police as crime fighters were the public symbolizations of police work. In Burke’s terms they are the dramas through which police and their work are given meaning. I shall return to Burke’s conception of action as drama shortly.

**Terministic Screens**

Among the many aphorisms which pepper Burke’s salty prose is one that I am especially fond of: “Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing.” Reality is screened through the terminologies which we utilize in interpreting and communicating. Our theories, our concepts, and our constructed contexts are always partial. The sociologist’s view is “oversocialized”; the psychologist’s is “overpsychologized”; the humanist’s is “overhumanized”; the social scientist’s is “overscientized”.

Here Burke antedates Schutz in seeing how terministic screens prefigure and typify situations. But Burke carries the point at least a step further in recognizing how types, like “bureaucracy” or “capitalism”, become “ultimate endings” to thought and speech. Contemporary social science refers to such pure and unsullied constructions as models. Weber referred to them as “ideal types”. For Burke these “perfected” ideas are “rotten with perfection” in that they impose simplistic and uniform meanings on the multifaceted, contradictory, and plural character of human acts.
Such screens are terministic, not deterministic. In another sense crucial to Burke they are terminal; they carry their users to an ultimate end, a terminus ad quern. Drawing analogies from theology, Burke uses the word “God” as exemplar of the ultimate terminal, the ground of everything. Earlier he presented the same idea in discussing how language constructs a reality and reduces the complexity of human acts and motives to pure forms:

"Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality. To this end they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality" (GM, p. 59).

In selecting reality, human beings necessarily reduce the complex to the simple; the impure to the pure. Thus societies and cultures can be seen as using terms as theologies use “God”, as the source and ground of being, making all else understandable. In a famous passage in *A Grammar of Motives* Burke describes “money” as a God-term in modern Western societies (pp. 91-117). It represents termination. Once action has been accounted for in terms of money, nothing further need be said.

But this is not the only sense of termination. The key words, the “God-terms”, of a culture lead on to purity. Not only are they ideal types in the Weberian sense, but they become ideals as aspirations. Capitalism and socialism become terms of endearment, matters to be pursued both as explanations and as goals. Therein lies the rub that leads on to deflection. A society that valued purely money would no longer be able to recognize money because nothing else would have value. Reaching toward their terminus, terms end in termination. Even this essay deflects us from the “real”, the total Burke. In order to be organized, logical, and coherent I must reduce the Burke of all of his writings to a perfect Burke, an abstract Burke, must out-Burke Burke. This is what Burke means when he says that human beings are “rotten with perfection”.

The implications for social research of Burke’s discussion of terministic screens are considerable. Burke’s essay underscores the plural possibilities of interpretation and the necessarily limited nature of any one schematic framework. Along with other contemporary social scientists, he stands Marx on his head and restores the upturned Hegel. It is not human existence that determines consciousness but consciousness that determines existence, or at least they are coequal. Our linguistic screens prefigure experience. They frame and limit our existence. They constitute the categories through which we experience the social structures that often seem so determining.

The Dramatistic Perspective

Like most who wear the badge of literary critic Burke is absorbed with the problem of interpretation. Where he becomes so significant for sociology is in his brand of dramatistic interpretive analysis. “Drama” for him is not a metaphor to be used in certain areas of social life
but a fixed term that helps us discover what the implications of the terms "act" and "person" really are\textsuperscript{16}. In interpreting and depicting character the dramatist faces the same problems as does the sociologist. This is because human action is necessarily dramatic. Conflict, purpose, and choice are inherent in action as distinct from motion. These characteristics follow from the fact that humans use and respond to symbols in creating meanings for themselves and their situations.

Despite the clarity of his usage, Burke is often associated with the view of drama as metaphor for social action, sometimes referred to by sociologists as the "dramaturgical perspective". The perspective invites comparisons between what goes on in and out of the theater. Says Combs, for example, "The dramatic possibility exists in everyday life, in junctures where the social actor is called upon to utilize theatrical resources and is aware of the drama of the scene, including the scrutiny of one's own performance"\textsuperscript{17}.

Important as the influence of Burke has been on the development of the dramaturgical perspective in sociology, that concept needs to be distinguished from what Burke has termed his perspective, "the method of dramatism".

\textit{Goffman's dramaturgy}

Erving Goffman's brilliant analyses of human interaction are frequently cited as the extension of Burke into social science. The concept of the "dramaturgical perspective" is introduced on the first page of the preface of his first book, \textit{The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life}:

"The perspective employed in this reports is that of the theatrical performance; the principles derived are dramaturgical ones. I shall consider the ways in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may or may not do while sustaining his performance before them"\textsuperscript{18}.

Both here and throughout his work Goffman's view of human action is dramaturgical — concerned with acting in the theatrical sense of the actor in a staged play. Goffman was drawn to the analysis of how credibility is created and how deception can occur. Consider his analysis of the merry-go-round in a classic discussion of role distance\textsuperscript{19}. He tells us how children convey a sense of their character — as brave, foolhardy, or olympian — in how they ride, sit, mount, and dismount. Adults using the merry-go-round convey by their talk and their behavior that they are not "truly" riders but are there as guardians of a child, as satirists, or as operators. As he tells us in the excerpt quoted above, his dramaturgy is just that — the principles by which stage actors and actresses operate applied to human interaction.

In Goffman's usage the stage is a metaphor drawn on to understand and analyze interaction. The play is not the thing; the way it is played is the focal point. There is much
continuity with Burke in the conception of meaning as a creation of the human being and of the audience-oriented nature of interaction. But there are also significant differences which flow from Goffman's emphasis on the stage actors and Burke's on the play itself.

Goffman's emphasis is on performances and performers; Burke's is on language and interpretation. In the first paragraph of his major summative article, written for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, he defines his dramatistic method:

"Dramatism is a method of analysis and a corresponding critique of terminology designed to show that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives is via a methodological inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions" ("Dramatism", p. 445).

Here the pentad remains both a focus of Burke's approach to interpretation and an illustration of his pluralistic method. It is central to his view that humans approach the world with symbolic understandings and that these, like Aristotle's four causes, provide a patterned set of symbols for our ways of thinking. As dramatists know, any description of action must involve the playwright in placing the actor and his/her act in a scene, specifying an agency by which the act is accomplished, and indicating some purpose to the action. In *A Grammar of Motives* Burke elaborates on the pentad, using it to identify the forms of thought necessary to interpretations of action. In applying it to such diverse forms as poems, *The Communist Manifesto*, and constitutions, he continues the search for forms of thought which are common to seemingly disparate areas of intellectual activity.

The *Grammar* goes beyond the pentad to a general analysis of how our prefigured systems of thought emphasize some things at the expense of others. Academic disciplines, pushing their concepts to the ultimate, end by "oversociologizing", "overpsychologizing", and "overeconomizing" the human subject. Psychology can be seen as a language which emphasizes the agent; sociology as a language of scenes. Each overstates its case. Awareness of how varying schemes become limiting provides the method for analyzing the shortcomings of each perspective.

The method also provides an impressive tool for understanding how interpretive schemes work. It leads sociologists to a close analysis of the language which they use when they talk and when they write, as well as to analysis of how their subjects talk and write. Above all it helps them see the limitations of what I have elsewhere called the "windowpane" view of scientific language — the view that language can be, and ought to be, a clear window through which the scientist communicates findings and conclusions to an audience. Sociologists bring to the description and analyses of their research an already given stock of images which reflect ways of using the terms of the pentad. In my research I found that very different consequences ensue if you purport to be studying "drinking-drivers" or "drinking-driving". The first is a language of agent, of psychology, and leads to a deemphasis on context, on scene. It fits the search for personal characteristics of drivers and the neglect of scenic properties. The second emphasizes the event, including the purposes of the journey, the context of people interacting, the uses of the automobile and its place in the "world" of the driver. "Drinking-driving" leads the scholar and the reader more easily toward attending to aspects of
time, social interactions, and environment. It takes attention away from the characteristics of the motorist. However the phenomena are labeled, the language is inevitably selective and partial. It is a screen and cannot be a windowpane.

Burke has thus laid the foundations for a self-critical, self-aware examination of the categories of thought and expression in the social sciences. He has provided a link between the critical analysis of literary and social science texts.

The Rhetoric of Social Action

Of greatest importance for the sociologist is Burke’s conception of human action as rhetorical. The importation of rhetorical analysis into social research is enormously productive. Both the human actions which the sociologist studies and the texts in which sociological analyses are reported are perceivable as rhetorical pursuits. In Burke’s terms, they involve strategies for dealing with situations by adapting ideas to audiences. Goffman has used the ideas, though not the direct language of rhetorical theory, in describing human interaction as performative. Like Goffman, Burke looks for unexpected meanings and insights in strange, often exotic places: In *A Rhetoric of Motives* (RM), he says that “we seek to mark off the areas of rhetoric by showing how a rhetorical motive is often present where it is not usually recognized, or thought to belong”\(^{21}\).

Here Burke shows us how rhetorical analysis can illuminate both literary texts and human relations in general. Identification is the key rhetorical process through which poets and ordinary people attempt to persuade others. In the selective use of symbols there are implicit, and sometimes explicit, appeals to others to join with or oppose the identities which are proffered. Burke shows how images of killing in Milton and in Matthew Arnold can become a paradigm for descriptions of change and transformation, and how they can thus illuminate the references to killing in Freud (RM, chap. 1). The identification of killing as transformation is the unifying element in the structure of thought created in these texts. The imagery of revolutionary violence may emerge in the clothing of death and destruction or in the vestments of the utopian Eden to be attained through it. In these texts, violence is identified as passage, as transformation, and is provided with justifications. Violence as transformation, says Burke, is a stage toward “higher” values, more acceptable than violence described in terms of destruction.

There are three aspects of Burke’s rhetorical perspective that have borne juicy fruit for sociologists. The first is the enormously insightful approach to human interaction as rhetorical. The second is the understanding of social science research as affected by rhetorical elements. Last, Burke demonstrates the basic categories for seeing and interpreting social action which literature and literary analysis share with sociology.

The first has been superbly utilized in Goffman’s analyses of human interaction as
presentational and performative. To speak of “impression management” is to view interaction as audience-directed and adaptive. Goffman’s work is filled with illuminating insights into the process by which human beings confer symbolic meanings on action otherwise interpreted as utilitarian or “meaningless”. In studying institutions for persons labeled “mentally disturbed”, Goffman shows that behavior seen by psychiatrists as less than sane is better understood as attempts by the patients to persuade themselves and others that they are persons of autonomy and self-control. The “stashing” of small objects in special places is interpreted as representing the extension and autonomy of the self — as a way of convincing themselves and others of their self-identity. In the asylum’s institutional setting they have had to give up many other signs of their particularity. The psychiatrist identifies the “stashing” behavior as foolish and psychotic. The sociologist, in describing the behavior as a rhetorical action, confers a different identity on the act. It is not an act of “crazy people” but a strategy of managing self-identity in a institution which threatens self-esteem and recognition.

Rhetorical analysis has rich usages beyond the microlevel of interactions. It is also a way of seeing how public acts and artifacts serve to persuade audiences that legal, political, and social institutions have a particular character. I have above described Manning’s analysis of the “police myth”, which leads the public to see crime as a matter more of individuals than of environments, as other terminologies might lead us to see it.

For Burke, the rhetorical, identifying practices are crucial ways in which the social order is created and sustained. The negative, the “thou shalt not”, is essential to a view of society as social order. In Burke’s often repeated sequence: if drama, then conflict; if conflict, then victimage. The idea of order implies the possibility of disorder. The guilt connected with the negative, with disobedience and rebellion, implies the need for redemption and expiation. To dramatise order, scapegoating is necessary. It is in ritual and ceremony that the drama of social life is carried out. I have argued that, whatever their utilitarian consequences, legislation, legal opinions, and courts are significant ways to dramatize the moral order of the society. They state the character of the public order against which specific actions can be judged as publicly acceptable.

Anthropologists had used such ideas, as had Durkheim, in analyzing human societies, but they were little used until recently in studying contemporary societies. The recent appearance of studies of modern life as embodying the symbolic order of ritual and ceremony owes much to Burke.

Rhetorical concepts are also a way of describing and discussing the languages of social sciences. The language of social science is usually presented as if it had no literary or rhetorical functions. Social scientists have generally treated their language as scientific: “Just the facts, ma’am, just the facts.” Burke’s influence has recently led to an analysis of the stuff of sociology, its theories and its research reports, as persuasionary attempts. In these studies, the linguistic style and the form of a text become important parts of the research. Rhetoric is a key to its structure and thought. Even the presentation of a text as “scientific” requires attention to style.
and literary devices which persuade and instruct the audience in how it is to be taken\textsuperscript{25}. Science, including social science, often displays a “style of nonstyle”, couching its language so as to convince audiences that it is “above” stylistic concern.

Burke’s attention to rhetorical technique provides a way of understanding social theorists as well. Consider, in this connection, Burke’s analysis of Marx and Mannheim in their treatments of ideology. Each offers positive, dialectical, and ultimate terms, but their dialectical theories offer different identifications and divisions. Both see ideas as developing within historical contexts in dialectical opposition; feudalism to capitalism to socialism; ideology to utopia; status quo to opposition. Marx places the dialectical conflicts in a developmental frame; he posits an ultimate — the socialist society — that transcends the dialectic. Mannheim, in not doing so, puts all ideologies on equal terms. As Burke suggests, Mannheim liberalizes Marx (RM, pp. 183-207).

Burke’s discovery of the ubiquitousness of rhetoric is echoed in Northrop Frye’s remark:

“\textit{Anything which makes a functional use of words will always be involved in all the technical problems of words, including rhetorical problems. The only road from grammar to logic, then, runs through the intermediate territory of rhetoric}”\textsuperscript{26}.

As a writer of words the social scientist cannot escape the problems of rhetoric which are embedded in the use of language directed toward an audience. Style, narrative, voice, and distance are all modes of presentation. Data, findings, and conclusions do not exist in a vacuumpacked container, without context or convention. Science is a form of literature in that it uses words to create a narrative. It is a form of rhetoric in that it uses words to persuade an audience. This is not to equate science with rhetoric or literature but to call attention to particular forms of scientific rhetoric and to point to the place of the literary aspects of science in the process of discovery and proof\textsuperscript{27}. Hayden White has done this magnificently in studying nineteenth-century historical writing as rhetoric. Using Burkean language, among other tools, White has presented a tropological analysis that reveals the underlying rhetorics of particular historians\textsuperscript{28}.

To see science and social science as literary and rhetorical productions is to apply the third aspect of the Burkean method. I do not mean the use of novels as illustrations but rather the modes of literary analysis applied to the texts of science. I have made some preliminary forays into the literary analysis of social science research in studying the text of research reports on drinking-driving and in analyzing organizational documents\textsuperscript{29}. What needs yet to be accomplished is the development of a literary criticism of factual material\textsuperscript{30}. What is clear from Burke is that literature is everywhere. It is not only in Culture but also in culture. Setting aside the problems of aesthetics, there is an intellectual need to scrutinize the stylistic and formal aspects of factual materials, of written products.

There is another sense in which the link between the humanities and the social sciences builds on the insights that Burke’s discussion of rhetoric has given us. Burke builds bridges, as always, between the analysis of literature and the analysis of human action. He moves, for
example, from Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* to Castiglione’s *The Courtier* to Kafka’s *The Castle*, finding in each principles for bridging relations between classes. To find in the idea of courtship the paradigm of how classes utilize rhetorical principles provides us with an apparatus for observing how social groups interact (RM, pp. 208-44). In *The Rhetoric of Motives* Burke moves from the principles of rhetoric to the nature of social order, using courtship as a paradigm of the way in which diverse groups persuade each other of common identifications. His perspective of society is fundamentally rhetorical.

**Dialectics, Comedy and Dramatic Irony**

“Dramatic” and “dialectic” are terms which Burke characterizes as “equitable” (GM, p. 511). Each represents a partial view of reality. “Where the agents are in action we have drama; where the agents are in ideation we have dialectic” (GM, p. 512). Yet, as he points out, the two are mutually influential. There are no ideas without persons; no persons without ideas. His analysis of language leads into a methodology in which no single perspective or single term can render a complete account of experience or reality. The implications of terministic screens for social research lie in the plural possibilities of interpretation and the necessarily limited nature of any one schematic framework. The deliberate invitation to paradox, inconsistency, contradiction, and comedy are the mark of a method which, following Richard Brown, I refer to as dialectical irony — seeing something from the viewpoint of its opposite. To analyze human action the analyst must consider the whole from the standpoint of each of the terms.

Wayne Booth refers to Burke as a “lumper” rather than a “splitter.” Lumpers find similarities where others find only differences. Splitters are the opposite; they find differences where others find similarities. (Parsons was a splitter; Goffman was a lumper.) For the thoroughgoing dialectician nothing is as it seems to be. Burke’s discussion of substance prepares us for this. Nothing, except God, can exist without a context. To define, to “split”, necessitates a negation — saying what the object is not in order to say what it is.

“With the dialectic substance the irony is explicit. For it derives its character from the systematic contemplation of the antinomies attendant upon the fact that we necessarily define a thing in terms of something else” (GM, p. 33).

Such a dialectical method has far more profound implications for social science than the Hegelian-Marxian version. Unlike that well-worn shibboleth of contemporary coffeehouses, Burke’s has no synthesis as its absolute. It directs us toward the ambiguities and complexities which are lost when we adopt a utilitarian logic and a positivist method. The exclusive search for cause and effect, treating human action as animal motion, leads us again to the partiality and monism which dialectical perspective overcomes.

Burke presents a good illustration of what this means for the social sciences in discussing what a dialectical history would look like:
"History, in this sense, would be a dialectic of characters in which, for instance, we should never expect to see 'feudalism' overthrown by 'capitalism' and 'capitalism' succeeded by some manner of national or international or non-national or neo-national or post-national socialism — but rather should note elements of all such positions (or 'voices') existing always, but attaining greater clarity of expression or imperiousness of proportion in one period than another" (GM, p. 513).

**The comic stance**

Here then is the clue to the Burkean style of puns, jokes, and downright comedy, sometimes descending into buffoonery. Comedy is the art of criticism, as irony is the trope of dialectics. The search for the opposite is the method of the dialectician. Burke's admonition to adopt a "perspective by incongruity" is a logical (or logo-logical) conclusion to his dialectical perspective.

Perspective by incongruity is more than style in Burke. It is an exhortation to see the limited nature of any one cognitive framework. The terminologies in use are terministic screens that shield us from the multiplicity of possibilities. The wise observer recognizes that opposites are not so different after all. Comedy points up the limits of intelligence and knowledge. As Burke says in *Attitudes toward History*, people are not vicious but they are often mistaken and necessarily mistaken: "Every insight contains its own special kind of blindness".

This is a source of Burke's predilection for the oxymoron, for terms like "secular conversion", or his fondness for Veblen's "trained incapacity". These terms enable us to recognize the paradoxes, ambiguities, and multiple facets of actions and events.

**A dialogic social science**

What Burke's perspective by incongruity implies for the social science is precisely the blurring and blunting of the sharply defined edges of typologies. The logic and method of the hard sciences depend upon just that precise and rigid definition which a pluralistic method denies. It is an implicit assumption of causal analysis that there is a "right" answer. That one answer be the true answer while others are false is the ideal toward which, in their Enlightenment spirit, the social sciences have aspired.

A deeply held pluralism recognizes two barriers in the way of this ideal. The first is the limitations of language and of theory in representing the multifold character of the real world. The second is the importance of the researcher to the total project. His or her theories, biases, attitudes, and dramatistic categories are essential to the process of selectivity. But, at the same time, they prevent social science from being even an approximation of the model of knowing in use in the natural sciences.
What emerges is a dialogic picture of the social sciences in place of the monistic model that is even today the accepted standard. No one perspective, no single study can do justice or mercy to the complexity of human behavior. The sociologist is then the supreme ironist, the critic whose task is to point to the multiple understandings, the alternative possibilities inhering in situations, and to bring new meanings and metaphors to bear on taken-for-granted assumptions. Our aim, as Burke suggests in his discussion of dialectic and irony, is to include all the relevant terms of development in a perspective of perspectives. But even as we do so, we must recognize that no one designation, no one solution, no one answer is final, encompassing, or ultimate. The dialogue of all voices is itself the answer and not a road to one.

Armed with Burkean method, the sociologist's trope is that of irony. Sociology can achieve a form of criticism that reveals the limits, the assumptions of what is taken for granted in culture. It can do so by incongruity, by seeing the world from as many vantage points as possible. As Rueckert put it: "Burke admonishes us that, if we want to see something accurately, we should at least try to see it whole".

What this implies is a reach for a kind of wisdom rather than the goal of certain knowledge. Knowledge is a scientific term and implies a finality that is belied by the conception of human action as symbolic. Wisdom stems from a humility that recognizes, through comedy, the human limitations on knowledge. Being self-critical, the sociologist realizes that his own designations, his own metaphors are also ways of constructing and creating a way of seeing and are always in need of correction. Burke put the matter well in *Attitudes toward History* when he likened our innocent error-making to characters in a play:

"The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters in the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once, it is chastened by dramatic irony" (p. 41).

The sociologist is like the child watching the stage. Knowing more parts and having read the script the child cries out to the players and tries to warn them to avoid the ending as it has been written. Alternatively the sociologist provides the playwright with several other possible ways to bring the play to its last curtain.

**An Image of Society**

Burke's depiction of human action as symbolic terminates in a view of society in which naming and ritual are central to social cohesion and consistency. Here again, the unity of art and sociology is proclaimed.

In his approach to the study of society as a coordinated set of human relationships, Burke builds on his view of the dramatic character of action. Describing scenes, he tells us in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, is the province of the physical sciences; describing dramas is the role of the social sciences. The remark appears in a chapter whose title is an introduction to the
Burkean conception of society: “Ritual Drama as ‘Hub’.” If drama is the central term in the study of social action, then ritual is the clearest form of drama and the essential form. Human acts take on recurrent meanings through stylization of content. Here society exists in the affirming order which ritual celebrates and supports.

**Social structure and consciousness**

In his image of society, Burke has antedated the current turn toward the importance of language and culture. As suggested earlier, Marx’s famous proposition that existence determines consciousness has for a very long been the grand aphorism written over the symbolic doors of sociological houses. It made sociology the scenic discipline par excellence. The determinism and reductionism that Burke so rightly complains about have been, with notable exceptions, conventional wisdom among sociologists. The characteristic method of sociology has been to derive action from context; to find in classes, status groups, or institutions the ground for human behavior, and in the processes (forces) of historical change the motor of social dynamics.

In many of the intellectual currents of the past two decades, from Levi-Strauss and Alfred Schutz on, there has been a standing on its head of the Marxian aphorism; Hegel has had his sweet vengeance! Our interpretations, our social constructions become the reified institutions and groups which we then use to explain our actions. Hugh Duncan characterizes this reification in describing Burke’s insistence on the role of social dramas: “Such dramatic enactment does not ‘reflect’ social structure but creates it.” Hence, we become members of a class, of an ethnic group, or of a family as we have names for them, and we identify ourselves within them. A history of groups would show how the perception of community is built up out of the terminologies, ceremonies, and rituals through which we compose our consciousness of ourselves as joining with others.

**Authority and acceptance**

Burke’s view of society is congruent with both his emphasis on symbolic acts and the implicit criticisms of social determinism in his dialectics. One can picture much of his work as an attempt to rid us of the view of appearances as understandably ordered and to go beyond the disorder of appearances to perceive the forms which are constant. This form of structuralism is found in his characterization of his *A Grammar of Motives* as a book concerned with basic forms of thought “in accordance with the nature of the world as all men necessarily experience it.” These basic forms comprise the “social structure” which prefigures the way in which a society is experienced.

The problem of order is central to Burkean sociology. Just as language frames provide us
with order in interaction, so too the terminologies we develop create frames of acceptance and rejection of authority. It is the fact of authority (hierarchy) that is the source of order and rejection in society. Humans, being talkers and writers, can conjure up “Thou shalts” and “Thou shalt nots”. The acceptance and rejection of morals, of authority, and of division is ever present. We are capable of thinking the negative and are also “goaded by the spirit of hierarchy”.

Relations between groups, between classes, between the powerful and the powerless, and between the priest and the parishioner are thought about and organized through our terms. Frames of acceptance are, as Burke puts it in the title of the book *Attitudes toward History* (1937), not forms of passivity but the terms of relationship. He uses two seminal thinkers as examples. Both Aquinas and Marx saw the existence of classes. For Aquinas they were punishment for the fall of man; for Marx a consequence of capitalist exploitation. Aquinas’ program was one of passive acceptance; Marx’s program for revolution. Both are forms of order and hierarchy, for in each there is a higher and a lower state of being. Each forms a mode of understanding and explanation. Aquinas justifies the order of class. Marx attacks it.

If there is hierarchy and social order, there is also the rejection of order and consequent guilt. Here is the foundation of Burke’s society: if drama, then conflict; if conflict, then hierarchy, then guilt; if guilt, then redemption; if redemption, then victimage. Rejection means the need to expiate the resulting guilt. Ritual — dramatic enactments — provides us with visible symbols in which hierarchy is built up and in which rejection is atoned for. The scapegoat, the victim, is essential to the order of society. The sacrificial principle is essential. The Christian drama is enacted again and again. Even Manning’s “police myth” is a form for accepting policing as the drama of good against evil in which police represent the potential sacrificial lambs redeeming the citizenry from the guilt of criminality.

Hierarchy is constant in Burke’s perception of society because in every area of life there is an orderliness of principle, of higher and lower, nobler and baser. Diversity, conflict, and division portend the disruption of order, the clash of frames. The fact of hierarchy itself dictates the need for disorder as well.

### The Limits of Burke’s Sociology: A Critique

Despite the critique of positivist determinism, sociologists still look at context as the key word of social analysis. Indeed Burke’s view of human action, including literature, as strategies for acting in situations is especially congenial to the sociologist. But it is an analysis of interaction in which the context is, in its scope and circumference, strangely narrow or unaccounted for. I look for some way of linking up particular ways of placement, particular God-terms, with historical periods, with classes, nationality groups, or social structures.
The repression of social structure

The problem of social structure remains, even though the conventional wisdom of a deterministic framework is rejected. Sociologists refer to it as the problem of the micro and the macro levels of analysis. Burke’s perspective, rich and productive as it is, is weakest in his perceptions of the context within which the symbols exist. These are taken for granted. At several points in his writing Burke hints at another sociology, a return of the repressed structure that has been outlawed at other stages. In an article entitled “Dramatism” he contends that “property in any form sets the conditions for conflict” (and hence culminates in some sort of victimage) (p. 451, emphasis added).

Strange word, “conditions”, in a context of action rather than motion. In what ways does property impinge on cooperation and conflict? The problem of the role of existence remains either unexplored or accepted. Here I find Burke either mute or confusing. The sociologist wants more. Having lifted the Pandora’s box I wish for Burke to provide some new wrapping.

Burke’s emphasis on language places him in the same cage as the rest of us who have sought to challenge an excessively positivist intellectual domination with the idealist weapons of linguistic nominalism. If language contains the frameworks through which experience is conceived and strategies developed toward named situations, how do we account for the attitudes which the strategies express? Society becomes a cognitive world without interests or sentiments; without social structure or group loyalties; without the emotive forces of love or greed or search for glory.

Society as hierarchy: order and disorder

Neither does Burke’s view of society as hierarchy and order stand up well as a rudimentary social system. It should not surprise us, or Burke, that any one system or scheme of understanding is partial. Order and hierarchy are but one side of the many sides of social life. If human beings prize order, so too do they prize disorder; if they possess the spirit of hierarchy, so too do they possess the spirit of equality, spontaneity, and rebellion. The rational and the romantic remain dual sides of human life and social arrangements.

The anthropologist Victor Turner has given valuable insight into society with his contrast between structure — the hierarchical, role-allocative organization of life — and communitas, the sense of human similitude and solidaristic feeling. A great deal of ritual celebrates the spirit of equality rather than the dividing order of hierarchy. It is strange that so dialectical a thinker as Burke should turn hierarchy and order into ultimates.

Human social life is too multiple in spirit and existence to be so readily summed up. It is in the ambiguities and ambivalences, the expressed and the unexpressed, the protests and disorder in the name of maintaining order — the paradoxes of society — that it exists. Even to describe
an aggregate of people as a society is to construct a "pure" ideal belied by the situated events and activities of daily life, with its mistakes, inconsistencies, indeterminacies, and opposites.

Burke’s Bridge: Literature and Sociology as Sisters under the Skin

I want to bring this paper to a close with some additional remarks about the ways in which sociology is a form of literature and what difference such a perspective makes for the sociologist. It is here that I especially see Burke as both well ahead of his time and as having made a profoundly significant gift to intellectual and scholarly thought.

In an essay by Burke with a title redolent of this idea, “Literature as Equipment for Living”, he tells us that his method “breaks down the barriers erected about literature as a specialized pursuit”. In calling for sociological classifications to be applied to literary works, he views literature as embodying a set of strategies for dealing with situations, akin to strategies found in other areas of life. In symbolic action, art works out the manifold modes of human alternatives. Drama is not only the study of how plays are written and performed; it is the working out of principles of human action. A sociological approach to literature would provide that wider compass in its categories:

“They would consider works of art... as strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off the evil eye, for purification, propitiation and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort and another” (PLF, p. 262).

The implications for literary analysis, and consequently for the social sciences, of such a conception of literature are considerable. Literature is more, much more, than the works of Shakespeare or Dashiell Hammett. It applies as well to works of fact as to works of art because the line cannot be drawn when language is in use. Income tax returns, deodorant advertisements, and the latest issue of The American Sociological Review are subject as well to literary critique and to the analysis of rhetorical and grammatical style.

Thus the sociologist can utilize the symbolic action of literature to help provide classifications and conceptions with which to understand other actions. But so too can he or she perceive much of human action as literary, symbolic and artistic. The one-sided view of human action as utilitarian and matter-of-fact ignores its multiple, polysemic, symbolic character. In treating both our own actions and those of the people we study as if they were devoid of art, we fail to understand much of human action.

While the reemergence of interest in Kenneth Burke may be a mere byproduct of the linguistic revolution in philosophy and, more recently, of the “interpretive turn” in the social sciences, it would be a mistake merely to honor Burke as a pioneer and then move on to more
“contemporary” figures. No one since Burke has provided a more “contemporary” view of the links between life and literature, society and art. The scope and subtlety of Burke’s “bridging operations” constitute a noble and enormously significant intellectual achievement.

NOTES


2. There are very few social scientists among the sixty-nine reviewers represented in the collection of contemporary reviews of Burke’s works collected and edited in William Rueckert, ed., Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke, 1924-1966 (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1969).


5. This continuity in Burke’s writings is explicitly recognized in William Rueckert’s Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1982).


10. See my studies of the American Temperance Movement in Symbolic Crusade (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1963) and the public issue of drinking-driving in The Culture of Public Problems (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1981). The character of the research and the theoretical development, as well as explicit reference to Burke, show the uses made of his ideas.

11. Murray J. Edelman’s studies of political symbolisme are found in his books The Symbolic Uses of Politics


23. This is a major conclusion in my two book-length studies of alcohol legislation and law enforcement, cited above.


27. Bruno Latour and Stephen Woolgar have shown, based on field observations of a scientific laboratory, how the eventual reporting of results guides the activities and organization of ideas throughout the experimental processes. See their study *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Fact* (Beverley Hills: Sage Publications, 1979).


29. I have used Burke's pentad, as well as concepts drawn from Wayne Booth, Northrop Frye, and others to analyze the fictions, metaphors, styles, and voice in the dramatic presentation of drinking-driving research studies. See especially chaps 3 and 4 of my *The Culture of Public Problems*. Also see Hayden White's most useful essay on the

30. I mean by this not the analysis of classic social science theorists, such as Marx, Weber, etc., but the use of literary concepts to examine how fact is constructed in the “nitty-gritty” work of journals, monographs, and government reports. Recent work in the sociology of science moves in this direction. In addition to those reported in this paper, see Barry Barnes and David Edge, eds, Science in Context (Cambridge : MIT Press, 1982).


33. Although it is perhaps the best-known Burkean concept among social scientists, it is not much used in Burke’s work after its initial presentation in part 2 of Permanence and Change. The method, of course, remains throughout his later work.


35. See my discussion of irony as the major contribution of sociology to the study of public affairs in chap. 8 of my The Culture of Public Problems.

36. This is contained in the significant discussion of tropes and especially of irony and dialectic in GM, pp. 511-17.


38. Duncan, Communication and Social Order, p. 113.

39. GM, p. 15. In referring to Burke as a “prestructuralist” I call attention to the importance he gives to how linguistic frames prefigure experience. There are many differences, I think, between Burke and the structuralists, especially in the deterministic assumptions that characterize the structuralists.

40. For analyses of this problem in sociology see the papers in Karen Knorr-Cetina and Aaron Cicourel, eds, Advances in Social Theory and Methodology : Toward an Integration of Micro- and Macro-Sociologies (Boston : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).


42. The essay has been reprinted in a number of places. My reference here is to its publication in PLF, p. 261.