

PREFACE



ALL RESEARCH IS BASED ON the notion that the world is explicable, an idea with powerful attractions. The attractions were all the greater in the Colorado Springs of the late 50s and early 60s of the last century, which was dominated by the Cold War, evidenced to me every morning as I looked out over my breakfast cereal towards the entrance to the hydrogen bomb-proof headquarters of the North American Air Defence Command at the base of Cheyenne Mountain, plainly visible fifteen miles away. Colorado Springs then offered a choice of certainties and hopes in the face of instant annihilation. But the one that captured my imagination in high school was the scientific hope that we would develop the equations to understand things completely and, once we put in the initial conditions, we could predict and control the course of the future. I was encouraged in this by the scientific optimism of the period, and by the Foundation Trilogy of Isaac Asimov, which invented the idea of the predictive, and controlling, science of psychohistory. There went with this, too, the sanctioning of curiosity as a blameless and necessary emotion.

I have long since lost the megalomaniac certainties, but the convictions remain that curiosity is laudable and that authoritative explanation is worth the work. So far as I can see, without those convictions you can hardly engage in so peculiar an occupation as explaining the human world to people who always already have a way of understanding it.

University brought two discoveries that sharpened my curiosity. The first was that others might live in radically different *worlds*, by which I mean, they live among assumptions which force us to discover, and possibly overturn, the unsuspected grounds of our own world. This came to me first through reading the German Renaissance theorist of poetics, Martin Opitz, whose received Aristotelian ideas of poetry as a poor relation to philosophy were so very different from the Romanticism – poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world – which I had imbibed with English lessons in school. The point was

that thereafter the discovery of others' worlds and, through them, my own world, would turn out to be an abiding obsession.

The other discovery, that ideas and attitudes could change so profoundly with time (e.g. as between Renaissance and Romanticism) seemed then to be a natural accompaniment: you could find your source of challenging otherness in the past, or beyond your front door today, but surprise was there for the meeting. Only much later did I discover that the understanding and explication of *worlds* rubs painfully against the understanding and explications of *histories*. And even when I chose to study a world through its varying histories in *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*, or gave an account of the world surrounding the history of *The Buddha*, the practical problem of finding a way of talking about both worlds and histories made me uneasy, but did not alert me to the real difficulties.

The difficulties only became apparent when I came face to face with evolutionary anthropologists, in this case the very congenial and interesting people at Durham University, whose ideas of explication were for the most part profoundly opposed to my own. Here was yet another world, not so much beyond my front door as inside it. True, my fellow socio-cultural anthropologists had already practiced a defence against evolutionists' propensity to explain behaviour by some evolutionary advantage to be found in it, and that defence was this: since human beings have devised such an enormous array of different cultures, we can always show some variation of human behaviour which is not compassed in your ideas of human nature, so your explanation from general evolutionary advantage to the whole species must be wrong. But the problem was that, however useful that defence might be, socio-cultural anthropologists were depending entirely on the sheer existence of that vast variety of cultures, without any sense of the source or origin of those tremendous differences. Indeed, early in the twentieth century anthropologists, faced with the purely speculative histories of cultural differences that had gone before, gave up any systematic aspiration to account for cultural differences; and to top it off, the standard anthropological way of writing, in the ethnographic or habitual present, was in effect anti-historical in its implications and invited the assumption either that the people involved had no history because their culture and society were unchanging, or that historical explanation was in any case irrelevant. What this all meant was that, however I and my colleagues might routinely write our ways more or less gracefully around this impasse, we simply had no grounds on which to make sense of the cultural differences that lay at the root of our undertaking.

At this point it was far too late in the plot to resurrect Asimov's psychohistory, but there did seem to be one slightly more modest question whose answer might retrieve some sense, and make for some reconciliation between talking

about worlds and talking about histories: given that there does exist such a wide variety of cultures among our species, what must generally be true of us to make that variety possible? To this there seemed an intertwined array of human attributes that make for constant changeability among us. We are intensely intersubjective; we respond rapidly and constantly to one another, with often unforeseeable consequences; our understanding of each other is often based more on interpretation and imagination than on certainty; we depend for understanding of our social environment on narrative and other more or less poetical means; we are, as a species, tremendously inventive in new and unexpected forms of symbolic reasoning and expression; and we are consequently also very fecund in the imagining and execution of new forms of social organisation and social action. To make this characterisation of human beings comparable to the evolutionary biologists' characterisation of other species, I used the word *sociality* as the keyword, so that our very volatile and mutable sociality could be compared in principle with the sociality of other species. And to describe the consequences of this volatility, I used the word *historicity*, referring to the fact of constant eventfulness and change among us. So even though there was nothing here to explain any particular case of cultural history and mutation, there was at least an explanation of human nature in general that would make us expect change and to allow for a sense that any explanation in the present tense would be just that, an explanation in the present which invites or demands an account of the past as well, and of change and instability, or at least of some good reason to find stasis and stability.

That is more or less the argument of the book *Why Humans have Cultures*. There is no significant mention of rhetoric in that book, however, and even though I had from the beginning been concerned with matters that fall easily enough under the heading of rhetoric, I had not thought to tap that reservoir of accomplished thought, not least because it is not one easily available on the British social science scene. The invitation from Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler in 2001 to join in the Rhetoric Culture project was therefore a turning point, because there I met, or re-met, many of my academic heroes and heroines, and found that, between us, we had always been speaking of rhetoric.

What does the notion of rhetoric do for, and to, the notion of culture and the practice of explaining cultures and societies? In the first place, it acts as another therapeutic corrective: our customary ways of talking and writing about society or societies had almost always assumed that there was something automatic at play, such that things could just go on and on without will. Rhetoric, on the other hand, places the will to make something happen, to make something change (or to make something abide against change), at the very foundation of our ideas about ourselves. It recognizes, in other words, the constant itch to adjust, move, improve, remove, and overcome the momen-

tary and not so momentary conditions and needs which are a part of our, and indeed all animals', circumstances of life. So the urge among us, as a so very social species, to act on others, or to persuade others to act for or with you, is therefore foundational; it is to be expected, just as change is to be expected; and therefore the view we have across human life is one in which people are always seeking to convince one another for this purpose or that. F.G. Bailey, in his essay in this book, begins by invoking the image of the *palaestrum*, the wrestling-school, to understand rhetoric. This is too narrow an image to apply across all rhetorical occasions, but it does capture the sense of urge and energy on one hand, and the sense of the world's resistant material on the other, that is immanent in the notion of rhetoric.

Following from this notion of rhetoric, culture also invites us to see our repertoires of speech and expression as always having a rhetorical edge, as having reality and meaning only insofar as it is applied for some desired end in some particular circumstance. Rhetoricians speak of "the rhetorical situation", a sort of idealised and abstracted particularity (if there could be such a thing) in which the rhetor, the speaker, addresses others with a sense of *kairos*, that is, of the timeliness and fitness of his address to his particular audience and their present circumstances. And so it invites the anthropologist or fellow researcher in the human sciences to explain not just the general form of our cultural repertoire, but the actual circumstances of use such that our explications are put back into life (so far as that is possible in written discourse).

It might seem, of course, that this move to the rhetorical situation, with its emphasis on particularity, is too far away from that social science which has been so successful in delineating larger and slower precessions of social change. It might seem, in other words, that to prescribe rhetoric as a style of explicating culture is to recommend writing the academic equivalent of very short stories or *haiku*, rather than monographs. But the circumstances bearing on any given rhetorical situation are not always plainly present, and may require longer exposition; nor is there any limit in principle to the circumstances which might be relevant. So there is every reason to think rhetoric relevant to large and slow movements in affairs (as Cintron and Carrithers show here) as well as to suddenly arising emergencies. Moreover it is often in moments of difficulty – whether those moments arise and pass away swiftly or slowly – that rhetoric leads to the creation of culture, the fashioning of new instruments by which people are able to work out what to think and how to act, both individually and collectively. On this view persuasion and conviction reach into all corners of social life, and the tools and schemas of culture are continually created by human beings to formulate and work their will on one another. This perspective, we think, opens onto fresh discoveries across the whole of social and cultural anthropology.

When I speak of ‘we’, I refer not just to the contributors to the argument in this volume, but to all those involved in the Rhetoric Culture Project. To put ‘us’ in context, it is perhaps important to observe that, by about the 1980’s, anthropologists had come to realise that our fundamental working ideas, deposited in the terms ‘culture’ and ‘social structure’, were too inflexible to capture the constant change that social and cultural life across the globe throw before us. New figures of thought such as ‘process’, ‘construction’, ‘invention’ and ‘performance’ crept into our conceptual vocabulary to capture some of this quicksilver movement, and the mysterious term ‘agency’ began to be used. The conviction grew too that social life does not move as in serried ranks or alone through plainly specifiable causal forces, but also through constant messy and mutual action, and that we needed some clearer way to think about these matters in a single idiom.

These and related questions were debated at the first conference on *Rhetoric Culture Theory*, which was held at Mainz in February 2002. In the next years further conferences followed on themes such as language, social relations, religion, politics and economics, spawning an abundance of papers that will be incorporated in different volumes of the Berghahn Books series *Studies in Rhetoric and Culture*. The fate of the contributions to general rhetoric culture theory was particularly varied. Originally they all were to be part of one volume entitled *Rhetoric Culture. Theory, Method and History*. In the event, that single volume was split into others, two of which are herewith published concurrently: *Rhetoric Culture Theory*, edited by Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler, and *Culture, Rhetoric and the Vicissitudes of Life*, edited by myself. It is my own understanding that all the authors of all these volumes have in fact investigated ‘vicissitudes of life’ and people’s rhetorical responses to them, but the essays here show those vicissitudes and responses, and the lessons we may learn from them, with particular poignancy.

Another lesson in this, and the other, volumes is that no piece of rhetoric is authored by its manifest speaker alone. I would like in particular to thank Bob Hariman, Ivo Strecker and Steve Tyler for their insightful help.