The rhetorical situation: its historical situation and its current limitations

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The rhetorical situation: its historical situation and its current limitations

by

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF BITZER'S THEORY OF RHETORICAL SITUATION

In this paper, I argue that the academic conversation surrounding Lloyd Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation has not taken into account the social implications that arise from the theory, given the unique historical moment of global capitalism. One reason for this gap may be that the academic discussion has focused too much on the rhetorical situation’s constituent of exigence. In an effort to move beyond the existing academic conversation regarding the rhetorical theory, I intend to reevaluate the theory of rhetorical situation in terms of what the theory is capable of doing and what the theory should do given the social and economic order of the present state of global capitalism. Ultimately, I hope to revitalize the rhetorical situation and show how it can be an extremely useful rhetorical theory given the economic and social order of global capitalism.

Presented originally in “The Rhetorical Situation” in 1968, Lloyd Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation constituted an effort, Bitzer claims, to “revive the notion of rhetorical situation, to provide at least the outline of an adequate conception of it, and to establish it as a controlling and fundamental concern of rhetorical theory” (2). To begin his endeavor, Bitzer distinguishes between rhetorical and non-rhetorical communication. Rhetorical communication is pragmatic in that “it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change the world” (3); whereas, non-rhetorical discourse is discourse that is uttered for any other purpose than to acclimate humans to their environment (i.e., poetry, discourse that occurs in a play, etc.). Bitzer clarifies this distinction by noting that that which is rhetorical changes

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1 I will refer to “The Rhetorical Situation” as RS throughout the remainder of the document.
the world, though not through direct interaction with existing items in the world; rather it is “the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action” (Bitzer 3). Because this results in an overly general definition of rhetorical communication, Bitzer further qualifies what is rhetorical by advancing the claim that “so controlling is situation that we should consider it the very ground of rhetorical activity” (5). He explicitly states that it is “not the rhetor and not the persuasive intent, but the situation [that] is the source and ground of rhetorical activity” (Bitzer 7).

After establishing this distinction between rhetorical and non-rhetorical discourse, Bitzer defines and discusses the components of the rhetorical situation: the rhetorical situation is “a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (Bitzer 6). As the primary and organizing principle of the situation, then, exigence is defined as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (6). That is, a rhetorical exigence is one that can be modified, and this modification must come through discourse (6).

In addition to exigence, the two other constituents of the rhetorical situation are audience and constraints. A rhetorical audience is capable of being constrained to the point that they are influenced to modify the exigence; furthermore, when influenced to modify the exigence, the rhetorical audience must also be capable of actually modifying the exigence (Bitzer 7-8). The rhetor then uses the constraints of the situation, which consist of “persons, events, objects, and relations,” to move the audience to modify the exigence (Bitzer 8). Bitzer notes that “standard sources of constraint include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests,
motives and the like; and when the orator enters the situation, his discourse not only harnesses constraints given by the situation, but provides additional important constraints—for example his personal character, his logical proofs, and his style” (8).

To complete his project of outlining a theory of situational rhetoric, Bitzer then discusses the six general characteristics of the rhetorical situation. The first is that “neither the presence of formal features in the discourse nor persuasive effect in a reader or hearer can be regarded as reliable marks of rhetorical discourse: A speech will be rhetorical when it is a response to the kind of situation which is rhetorical” (9). Here, Bitzer moves his theory away from centering on the rhetor’s intentions and the discourse itself, and thus moves his theory of the rhetorical situation away from previous rhetorical theories. Overall, then, “The Rhetorical Situation” focuses on the situational components that bring about rhetorical discourse rather than on stylistics, invention methodology, or audience, and in this first characteristic of the rhetorical situation Bitzer sets his theory apart from others.

The next three characteristics then describe the constrained relationships among the rhetor, audience, and situation. Specifically, the second characteristic explains that the situation “invites a fitting response, a response that fits the situation” (Bitzer 9), and the third is that the situation prescribes its fitting response. The situation’s capacity to prescribe the response means that, through the situation, the audience measures the rhetor’s response to determine whether it is a fitting response. The fourth general characteristic of the rhetorical situation then holds that the exigence and the complex of persons, objects, events and relations which generate rhetorical discourse are located in reality, are objective and publicly observable historic facts in the world we experience, are therefore available for scrutiny by an observer or critic who attends to them. To say that the
situation is objective, publicly observable, and historic means that it is real or genuine—that our critical examination will certify its existence. (Bitzer 11)

The fifth general characteristic of the rhetorical situation is that “rhetorical situations exhibit structures which are simple or complex, and more or less organized” (11). A simple rhetorical situation, according to Bitzer, has few meaningful elements, whereas a complex situation contains many functioning elements. Likewise, a simple rhetorical situation is organized or highly structured when “all of its elements are located and readied for the task to be performed” (Bitzer 11). For example, an organized situation may be a courtroom, where the judge, jury, and attorneys know the roles they will be expected to fill as the situation plays itself out.

Complex rhetorical situations, then, may be disorganized or loosely structured due to their “complexity or disconnectedness” (Bitzer 12). Bitzer lists numerous causes of complexity or disconnectedness:

(a) a single situation may involve numerous exigences; (b) exigences in the same situation may be incompatible; (c) two or more simultaneous rhetorical situations may compete for our attention, as in some parliamentary debates; (d) at a given moment, persons composing the audience of situation A may also be the audience of situations B, C, and D; (e) the rhetorical audience may be scattered, uneducated regarding its duties and powers, or it may dissipate; (f) constraints may be limited in number and force, and they may be incompatible. (12)

However, Bitzer is careful to point out that the causes of complexity and disconnectedness of a rhetorical situation are innumerable, and his list is by no means exhaustive.
The sixth general characteristic of rhetorical situations is that they have a temporal element. Bitzer explains that rhetorical situations “come into existence, then either mature or decay or mature and persist—conceivably some persist indefinitely. In any case, situations grow and come to maturity; they evolve to just the time when a rhetorical discourse would be most fitting” (12). Because of this temporal quality, Bitzer writes that “every rhetorical situation in principle evolves to a propitious moment for the fitting rhetorical response. After this moment, most situations decay” (12-13). However, some situations persist over time and have resulted in “a body of truly rhetorical literature” (Bitzer 13). Examples include works such as Plato’s Apology and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Bitzer explains that these are “rhetorical responses for us precisely because they speak to situations which persist—which are in some measure universal” (Bitzer 13). Moreover, some situations recur; this recurrence, according to Bitzer, may be due to either “the nature of things or conventions” (13). As examples, Bitzer refers to the courtroom setting and the tradition of the inaugural address. Due to the recursive nature of these situations, he argues that a discourse develops that accrues power and also becomes a “constraint upon any future response in the form” (Bitzer 13).

After circumscribing rhetorical discourse, defining the rhetorical situation and its constituent parts, and offering six general characteristics of the rhetorical situation, Bitzer concludes by philosophically legitimating his theory of rhetoric. For this, he compares the situational view of rhetoric to the scientific method. The scientific method is accepted philosophically, he claims, because “it provides principles, concepts, and procedures by which we come to know reality” (13). Similarly, rhetoric “provides principles, concepts, and procedures by which we effect valuable changes in reality” (14). Thus, instead of understanding rhetoric to be merely concerned with argument or persuasion (although Bitzer argues that both
may be part of a rhetorical act), Bitzer argues for a philosophical conception of rhetoric, which understands rhetoric to be the means of human reconciliation with the world.

In 1980, Bitzer revised his concept of the rhetorical situation in a book chapter entitled “Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective.” Instead of a heavily revised theory of the rhetorical situation, however, “Functional Communication” rendered a more detailed account of the rhetorical situation than Bitzer had previously described. While the definition of the rhetorical situation remained the same, “Functional Communication” extended the discussion of each element of the rhetorical situation, including environment, constraints, and exigence. However, very little, if anything, reveals a change in Bitzer’s understanding or use of these concepts from their initial descriptions in “The Rhetorical Situation.” Additionally, Bitzer offered a lengthy discussion of responsiveness to exigence, the evolution of situations, and fitting responses. “Functional Communication” thus offered an extended heuristic for understanding, analyzing, discussing, and evaluating the situation in which rhetorical acts occur.

From the outset, however, the critical attention paid to “The Rhetorical Situation” was mostly negative, with critics merely attempting to refute the theory by attacking the constituents of the situation. The most notable critique of the rhetorical situation came from Richard Vatz in his 1974 article, “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation.” Arguing from a sophistic or rhetorical view of reality rather than a philosophical view, Vatz proposed that “rhetoric is a cause not an effect of meaning” (160). According to Vatz, the rhetorical situation overlooked the fact that rhetors choose the exigences to which they respond and give salience. Because the

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2 I will refer to “Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective” as FC throughout the remainder of the essay.
rhetorical situation, as conceived by Bitzer, does not account for the rhetor’s choice, and instead ascribes the exigence prescriptive tendencies, Vatz concludes that the rhetor in the theory of rhetorical situation is absolved of any responsibility regarding his/her discourse and is ultimately absolved of any responsibility for certain exigences going unaltered. Vatz closes his essay by writing that “it is only when the meaning is seen as the result of a creative act and not a discovery, that rhetoric will be perceived as the supreme discipline it deserves to be” (161).

The emphasis on rhetoric as a “discipline” in these words reveals that Vatz’ concern is with rhetoric and its academic status as an area of study. While I believe that Vatz is correct to attack the selective recognition of exigence, the ultimate concern of my essay is not the welfare of rhetoric as a discipline, but the power of rhetoric to act in the world. That is, Bitzer’s rhetorical situation is concerned with the ways humans change the world to ensure survival and flourishing, and yet, as I will show, the theory does little more than explain how humans might change the world. My interest, in contrast, is in with how the rhetorical situation can be altered, the perspective shifted, to make this seemingly explanatory theory into a critical theory capable of changing the world. My specific concern here to explore how rhetoric can be used to alleviate exigences that exist because of the systemic inequalities that arise in the global capitalist economy.

However, before altering the theory of rhetorical situation, we must first understand the theory’s place in the history of rhetoric. In the following chapter, I will situate the rhetorical situation between Aristotle, who represents a philosophical approach to the effects of discourse in the world, and Foucault, who represents a more rhetorical approach to the effects of discourse. It is in the differences and similarities between the theories of these two rhetoricians that we see what Bitzer’s theory has to offer.
CHAPTER 2. SITUATING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION IN THE WESTERN RHETORICAL TRADITION AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOPHISM AND CAPITALISM

In chapter one, I summarized Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation. In this chapter, I intend to situate the theory of rhetorical situation historically in the greater Western rhetorical tradition and explain my understanding of the relationship between sophism and capitalism. Situating Bitzer’s theory among other established rhetorical theories will illustrate two ways that the rhetorical situation provides value for the concept of rhetoric. First, Bitzer’s theory maintains an orderly nature through its use of categories; this organization is consistent with Aristotle’s philosophical framework and allows the rhetorical situation to serve as a heuristic for understanding the role rhetoric plays in the increasingly chaotic reality of contemporary life. Secondly, despite maintaining an orderly nature, the theory also allows for contingency and situatedness, both of which are necessary to understand in a global system governed by the ubiquity of commodification and consumption that the capitalist economic order entails. In my discussion of sophism and capitalism, I explain the connection I see between sophistic concepts of contingency and situatedness and capitalism.

To situate the theory and exemplify its unique qualities, I will compare and contrast Bitzer’s theory with the rhetorical theories of Aristotle and Foucault. I have chosen Aristotle because of his position as the seminal figure in the Western rhetorical tradition, and I have chosen Foucault because he represents a post-modern, neo-sophistic perspective in the Western tradition. More generally, Aristotle and Foucault are very different from each other, and positioning the rhetorical situation among these two thinkers will demonstrate that Bitzer’s theory has a unique place in the greater Western rhetorical tradition. Moreover, I will show
that because of this unique place in the rhetorical tradition, Bitzer’s theory must be reconsidered in light of the unique historical moment in which we currently find ourselves. In this chapter, then, I will compare and contrast the theories of Bitzer, Aristotle, and Foucault in three areas: the nature of rhetoric (what is rhetoric?), the purpose of rhetoric (what should rhetoric do?), and the scope of rhetoric (what does/should the study of rhetoric encompass?).

The Nature of Rhetoric

In this section I will compare and contrast Bitzer, Aristotle, and Foucault’s account of the nature of rhetoric, which is, essentially, the definition of rhetoric. For Bitzer, the nature or definition of rhetoric is “a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of [an audience’s] thought and action” (RS 3-4). In this formulation, rhetoric is not necessarily ornamental speech or even spoken language, as the thoughts and actions of an audience can be influenced through any type of speech or written communication. Central to this definition of rhetoric is the altering of reality: according to Bitzer, change in the environment must occur for rhetorical action to have taken place. Ultimately persuasion will have occurred in rhetoric, according to Bitzer’s definition, when, through persuasion, an audience is motivated to alter its reality.

Just as Bitzer’s understanding of rhetoric hinges on the persuasion of an audience, persuasion is central to Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as well: rhetoric, according to Aristotle, is the “faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (1355b). That is, in Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric, rhetoric has an end, persuasion, and to reach that end one must be aware of and draw on the given circumstances to invent a persuasive argument or discourse. While rhetoric’s
end is more narrowly circumscribed in Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric than it is in Bitzer’s theory of rhetoric, Bitzer holds that persuasion must occur for the exigence to be remedied by an audience. Moreover, persuasion is a key aspect of the rhetorical situation, especially if the rhetor is not given an audience that perceives the exigence and constraints in the same way the rhetor perceives them.

While Aristotle’s and Bitzer’s definitions of rhetoric both revolve around the notion of persuasion, Foucault’s understanding of rhetoric—or discourse, to use his term—is not limited to the use of words for a specific purpose, such as persuasion. Instead, Foucault understands rhetoric to act upon materially and constitute the very idea of “reality.” In Foucault’s work, discourse does not describe the way humans neutrally transmit knowledge to other humans; instead, discourse, is “controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (216). Discourse thus has the ability to make a fundamental, material difference in the world, but what is made using discourse is determined by the person wielding it, and the study of discourse, or rhetoric, therefore has a different weight for Foucault than it does for Bitzer or Aristotle. Ultimately, the pressing concern facing those who study discourse, according to Foucault, is not the ends to which discourse is used (i.e., persuasion, argument, etc.), but the question of who uses discourse, what counts as legitimate discourse, and what the use of legitimate discourse affords its users.

While Foucault’s understanding of rhetoric clearly differs from that of Aristotle or Bitzer, Foucault, like Bitzer, is concerned with bringing about material changes in the world via discourse³. That is, both see discourse as having material

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³ I want to make it clear to my readers that I know Bitzer and Foucault are approaching language from two very different philosophical view points. I make every attempt to clarify this in the text.
power in the world. It seems evident, however, that Foucault is more of a materialist than Bitzer, because discourse for Foucault is constitutive of the world in a way that discourse is not for Bitzer. For Foucault, discourse represents the ways humans organize their experiences of reality\(^4\) and thus, through discourse, humans come to know "reality." Accordingly, Foucault views reality to be a social construction shaped by historical and material influences that have brought about changes in the discourse of a population. Still, though, material reality and the material effects of discourse are primary for Bitzer as well, as humans use language to navigate reality and influence the actions of other humans\(^5\).

As for the historical placement of Bitzer's understanding of the nature of rhetoric, we can see that it connects to both Aristotle's traditional understanding of rhetoric and Foucault's post-modern, neo-sophistic understanding of discourse. For both Bitzer and Aristotle, rhetoric involves persuasion in some central way, since persuasion for Aristotle is the ultimate end of rhetoric and is for Bitzer the result of a positively modified exigence. While knowing that persuasion is key for both Aristotle and Bitzer does not clarify how both theorists make use of categories and heuristics to operate within a given situation, it is nevertheless important to note that both theorists focus on persuasion, as it is in the means of persuasion that both Aristotle and Bitzer offer their categories and heuristics. I discuss Aristotle's and Bitzer's understandings of the means of persuasion below, when I discuss the scope of rhetoric. As for the relationship between Foucault and Bitzer, both similarly

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\(^4\) When using the term reality, I am referring to other environmental objects that exist outside the human person, such as trees, cars, houses, chairs, other humans, etc.

\(^5\) An expansion on this point: As I understand Bitzer, a human could survive in the world without learning a language, but this existence would be very simple. When the situation becomes complex, with more forces interacting upon the person, the person could increasingly use the aid of other humans. By learning language, a human becomes able to draw upon the wealth of aid that other humans represent and better navigate reality.
emphasize the power of discourse to act in the world materially. Both theorists thus see discourse as a force that can act to change and shape the world.

The Purpose of Rhetoric

To continue situating the theory of rhetorical situation among other theories in Western rhetorical tradition, I will now consider the Bitzer’s, Aristotle’s, and Foucault’s understanding of the purpose of rhetoric or rhetorical study. Such a discussion will illustrate how Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation offers helpful heuristic categories for understanding the complex web of contemporary reality. Additionally, a discussion of Bitzer’s, Aristotle’s, and Foucault’s understanding of the purpose of rhetoric will reveal that, although the rhetorical situation contains organizing categories and constituents, the theory also accounts for contingency and situatedness. Ultimately, a better understanding of the theory of rhetorical situation arrived at through a discussion of the three theorists’ understanding of the purpose of rhetoric will allow a thorough understanding of the particular aspects of the theory of rhetorical situation that are relevant to our discussion of the theory of rhetorical situation and the current historical moment of global capitalism.

We can begin exploring the purpose of rhetoric in Bitzer’s theory by noting that the rhetorical situation centers on the fact that human beings functionally interact with their environment. Rhetoric, for Bitzer, is the means through which human beings use discourse to “achieve harmonious adjustment with the environment” (FC 21). According to Bitzer’s theory, harmonious adjustment occurs after discourse presented to an audience leads the audience positively to modify an exigence. This positive modification of an exigence usually involves the rhetor’s use of persuasion; either the rhetor makes the audience understand the exigence to be an authentic exigence and thus modify it, or the rhetor merely persuades the audience
to modify the exigence. Persuasion most likely occurs because no stipulation in the theory of the rhetorical situation mandates that any person other than the rhetor necessarily sees an aspect of the environment as being exigent.

Since, for Bitzer, only the rhetor must see an exigence present in the environment, exigence is often an open topic for debate between the rhetor and his/her audience. Similarly, Aristotle’s understanding of the purpose of rhetoric focuses on the debatable. In section 1356b of the Rhetoric, Aristotle writes that the duty of rhetoric is to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon without arts or systems to guide us [...] The subjects of our deliberation are such as seem to present us with alternative possibilities: about things that could not have been, and cannot now or in the future be, other than they are, nobody who takes them to be of this nature wastes his time in deliberation.

We see that for Aristotle, the purpose of rhetoric is to discuss that for which no simple answers or tested methods offer guidance. It is because of rhetoric’s focus on that which is without a conclusive answer that rhetoric, for Aristotle, is ultimately concerned with persuasion. After arriving at what appears to be the best option, a rhetor must be capable of persuading others of the correctness or plausibility of that decision. How the rhetor goes about persuading an audience, according to Aristotle, reveals more similarities between Aristotle’s rhetorical theory and Bitzer’s rhetorical theory, but will be discussed in the section concerning the scope of rhetoric.

Generally, a similarity exists between Bitzer’s and Aristotle’s understanding of the purpose of rhetoric, in that rhetoric involves the negotiation of debatable topics. But it becomes apparent that Bitzer’s understanding of the purpose of rhetoric is also similar to Foucault’s when we consider the materiality of discourse in Foucault and Bitzer. Foucault’s overall theory of language is quite complicated, but
ultimately his project concerning the study of discourse is centered on analyzing how the structure of discourse impacts social institutions (i.e., marriage, family, religion, etc.) and social relations, which in turn affect—and, in fact, are—material reality. Ultimately, the purpose of the discipline of rhetoric for Foucault is to study how language and institutions interrelate to affect social relations. While the end of rhetoric is different for Foucault than it is for Bitzer, both appreciate the material effects discourse has on society and material reality. For Foucault, language is prescriptive, in that the structure of discourse dictates human perception and understanding of the reality, whereas for Bitzer, language is a tool humans use to bring about conditions in the world that allow for their survival and flourishing. And while Foucault's end in rhetorical study is to find ways to disrupt the prescriptive nature of language, the end of rhetorical study for Bitzer is to understand how humans use language to acclimate themselves to their surroundings. Their projects can be considered similar if one understands Foucault to describe the prescriptive nature of language as an exigence, which he seems to do, given the way language categorizes persons and gives and takes away their voice.

Again, in this comparison/contrast of Bitzer's rhetorical situation with the rhetorical theories of Aristotle and Foucault, we see that the rhetorical situation shares similarities with both of these theories. In general, the theory of rhetorical situation allows us to understand rhetorical communication in traditional terms (i.e., there is a rhetor, an audience, and some cause for communicating) in a fashion similar to Aristotle's theory of rhetoric, and yet at the same time Bitzer's theory allows us to see the plethora of constituents momentarily in place in the fleeting situation, which in turn enables us to understand the multiple influences that impact the rhetorical situation. Ultimately, as Aristotle's theory of rhetoric bridged the
sophists and Plato, Bitzer's theory of rhetoric seems to bridge Aristotle's theory of rhetoric and the neo-sophistic theory of rhetoric in Foucault.

The Scope of Rhetoric

Continuing the comparison and contrast of Bitzer's theory of rhetoric with Aristotle's and Foucault's theories of rhetoric, I will now discuss the three theorists' understanding of the scope of rhetoric. Through the discussion of these theorists' understanding of the scope of rhetoric I am hoping to illustrate the historical and conceptual location of the theory of rhetorical situation in the greater Western rhetorical tradition. I am also hoping to show that while the theory of rhetorical situation maintains an orderly system of constituents where to make sense of the situation its perceivers are asked to apply a structure of understanding upon the situation's various components and yet at the same time the theory allows various combinations of the situation's components to exercise variable and equally legitimate levels of influence in determining the outcome of a situation. Again, my claim is that the theory of rhetorical situation bridges Aristotle's more analytical theory of rhetoric and the more sophistic theory of the post-modern era; in this case my example theorist is Foucault.

I will begin with Bitzer's understanding of the scope of rhetoric as it is revealed in his theory of rhetorical situation. The scope of rhetoric, for Bitzer, is hinted at in his understanding of the nature and purpose of rhetoric. As mentioned above, according to Bitzer, the nature of rhetoric is communication that alters a situation when introduced and the purpose of rhetoric is that communication which alters a situation when introduced be used to alter situations wherein something is perceived to be other than it should be. Therefore the scope of rhetoric is not limited to a specific discipline in the academy, but can encompass all disciplines and all
segments of life. Rhetoric, because of its expansive nature and purpose, becomes a social science according to Bitzer's theory. The focus is not on ornamental speech, although it may be necessary, rather the focus becomes on understanding how humans use language to interact with one another and with any other element within the total environment. Ultimately, the study of rhetoric should not be limited to speeches made by political figures or ad campaigns for the latest technological gadget. Nor should the study of rhetoric be merely concerned with argument, invention, or business communication. Rather, rhetoric, according to the theory of rhetorical situation, should include the study of psychology, sociology, philosophy, and some general knowledge of the history of the hard sciences as these are all areas of study that help humans better understand human behavior and environmental interaction.

The scope of rhetoric seems to call for a study of all things for Bitzer, and for Aristotle, we see a similar recommendation for diversified knowledge. As was the case for Bitzer, the scope of rhetoric as it is understood by Aristotle can also be extrapolated from his understanding of the nature and purpose of rhetoric. To review, according to Aristotle the nature of rhetoric is to find the means of persuasion available in any given situation and the purpose of rhetoric is to use the available means of persuasion to persuade others in matters where there is no concrete knowledge or set precedents acting as a guide for action or understanding. The scope of rhetoric is broad for Aristotle because one cannot always know ahead of time what knowledge or skills one would need in order to persuade others in any given situation. Aristotle recommends drawing on basic propositions, such as possible vs. impossible, likely vs. unlikely, which are similar to the *Topics*. Basic perceptions of the situation may give a rhetor just enough of an understanding of a situation enabling him/her to persuade the audience.
While we see a similar call for diversity in general knowledge in Aristotle and Bitzer’s understanding of the scope of rhetoric, the scope of rhetoric for Foucault is endless. Because Foucault sees rhetoric as being concerned with imposed structures of language and the social implications of such linguistic structures and because we can never know the world without first making sense of our experiences by filtering them through language, we cannot restrict the scope of rhetoric. Rhetoric for Foucault seemingly consists then of the study of any use of language in any situation for any purpose. What Foucault is interested in is that we see the constitutive nature of language and the social implications of the structures within languages.

For all three theorists we see a general agreement that the scope of rhetoric be broad. For Bitzer the scope of rhetoric is expansive because there is never only one field of study or area of life in which exigences occur. Similarly, the scope of rhetoric is broad for Aristotle because rhetors must be able to draw on present information or use the Topics in order to read the situation in a way that allows the rhetor to create persuasive communication. While Bitzer and Aristotle viewed the scope of rhetoric as being broad, Foucault differs in that his understanding of language leads the scope of the study of rhetoric to be endless. Because Foucault sees structures present within language as impacting human understanding of the world, the scope of rhetoric is not limited to the study of one type of human discourse, but is instead unlimited in that language and the implications its structures have on society is what should be the focus of study. Ultimately, Bitzer’s understanding of the scope of rhetoric is more similar to Aristotle’s understanding of rhetoric. It is this gap between the theory of rhetorical situation and Foucault’s post-modern understanding of the implications of language that may be the source for Vatz’s critique of the theory of rhetorical situation, and therefore, can be understood to be the beginning point of my critique of the theory of rhetorical
situation as well. I will devote the third chapter of this paper to further explanation of this point.

The Relationship between Sophism and Capitalism

Before I move on to the third chapter, I feel I should offer a quick explanation of the relationship I see between sophism and capitalism. This relationship must be explicated as the remaining discussion of this paper hinges on my understanding of the relationship between these two concepts/historical moments. The following is a discussion of three main terms that are important to sophism and capitalism: kairos, competition and contradiction. Each section offers a discussion of how I see the sophistic understanding of the term to be related to capitalism, as discussed in the book Empire, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

Kairos

Kairos is defined as “the right moment” and “the opportune” (White 13). For Sophists, the major concern with communication is that the communication fit the moment, the situation. We see this in A defense on Behalf of Palamedes when Gorgias, an exemplary sophist, writes “to what part of the defense shall I turn my attention? For an unsupported allegation creates evident perplexity, and because of the perplexity, it follows that I am at a loss in my speech, unless I discover something out of the truth itself and out of the present necessity” (55). Here, Gorgias points out that the situation will guide his defense speech and that without looking to the situation, it would be hard to know where and how to start his defense.

Just as kairos thus guides the rhetoric of the Sophist, kairos similarly guides the players in late capitalism; the successful Sophist is able to adjust and adapt to
his/her situation, just as the successful individual under capitalism is able to adjust and adapt to his/her situation inside the socio-economic system of capitalism. Hardt and Negri claim that in the passage to the informational economy, one of the passages that has occurred enabling the world market to be actualized, the service industry reigns and that the "jobs [in the service industry] for the most part are highly mobile and involve flexible skills" (285). Additionally, Hardt and Negri go on to write that in the informational economy "we increasingly think like computers" (291). Considering Hardt and Negri compare human subjectivity to computers, an industry that is notorious for its perpetual change, it isn’t hard to believe that adapting to our situations in the capitalist world market isn’t easy. Not only do the changes in the economic markets make adaptation difficult, but in capitalism, a total system in constant flux, traditions are also constantly being broken in pursuit of profits. So, individuals are not just trying to cope with an ever increasing demand of flexible job skills, they also have to be prepared to be flexible with private matters, such as family structure, religion, etc., as well. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx summarizes the action of capitalism in the phrase: “all that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is made profane” (248). In other words, there is nothing that capitalism will let be if it slows the movement of commodities. For example, the rating system of films can make or break the box office numbers of feature films in the U.S. Yet, certain groups maintain that the rating system is necessary to protect children and sensitive viewers. Under this system, however, a rating of NC-17 will prevent any person who is younger than 17 from attending the movie, thus reducing the possible number of tickets sold. Because of the bottom-line

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6 Hardt and Negri reference this tendency of capitalism when they write that capital operates "through relays and networks of relationships of domination, without reliance on a transcendent center of power. It tends historically to destroy traditional social boundaries, expanding across territories and enveloping always new populations within its processes" (326).
concerns, people in the film industry have been lobbying to be rid of the tradition of the rating system and traditional notions of appropriateness, precisely because the system reduces the movement of commodities, in this case tickets.

While the film rating system does not seem as though it would be much for individuals to adapt to if missing, the generalized effect of the capitalist world market—and I think the Marx quote captures this—is that nothing is sacred. Deleuze and Guattari, two people who have studied this tendency, note the ability of capitalism to deterritorialize and reterritorialize; these terms refer to the way capitalism takes what Deleuze and Guattari call objective codes, such as myths and tragedies, and breaks them down, only to reinstitute them as subjective codes, such as the psychoanalytic use of the Oedipus complex to explain our libidinal energies.

An argument can be made that this deterritorialization and reterritorialization has occurred in our conceptualization of commodities. For example, the reification of commodities that Georg Lukacs noted in his theory of rationalization is a clear example of an objective code, in this case the commodity, being broken down and reinstated as a subjective code. That is, the commodity that had once been a clear category of market goods has shifted to include anything; there is no longer any line between that which is a commodity and that which isn’t a commodity. This is evident in our fundamental relationships, for example, when we measure our friends just as we measure our cars, by how far they can get us in the capitalist world market, even sincere friendships can not fall outside the system of commodity exchange.

Another example of deterritorialization occurring at the hands of capitalism, at least according to Hardt and Negri, is the deterritorialization of production. Immaterial labor allows for labor to be more and more deterritorialized because laborers can “stay at home and log on to the network” (296), because their work can
be done from any location. Instead of having a fixed position in the “territory” of corporate headquarters building, immaterial laborers cooperate from afar as members in a network working with one another by passing information along to get the job done. No longer do we have to physically go into work. As Hardt and Negri said, we can just log in to the network and get busy producing. It seems that only after an individual understands the situation, or kairos, of capitalism and the capitalist world market, he/her will be better able to function within the capitalist system.

If capitalism throws everything into flux, individuals will not survive or succeed if they do not understand the importance of reading the situation, or kairos. In other words, capitalism has created the conditions of modern day Sophism. We need to always be ready for change. In classes, such as computer science, biology, composition, etc., instructors aren’t teaching students how to do one complete task; instead, instructors show the students how to do many different parts of many different tasks. Writing program administrators and instructors, as well as administrators in other academic fields, have recognized that they can not send students out in the world having only taught them how to do one task really well, because if the situation changes and the one task is not longer primary, the student will be at a loss. More and more instructors are merely arming students with tools, such as flexibility and adaptability, specifically rhetorical knowledge, knowing that those tools will be the most important tools within the dynamic nature of the capitalist system the students will all to soon be entering. All this indicates that instructors are teaching, or trying to teach, kairos.

Hardt and Negri understand the importance of understanding the situation it seems, when they place communication as one of the four foci of immaterial labor. Without successful communication, networking doesn’t work. Without the person
you’re working with being in the next cubicle, it is imperative that he/she be able to clearly express any thoughts he/she might have about his/her work. Without being there to clear up any miscommunication, knowing how to respond properly in the moment, to a specific situation is vital to making the network model, which Hardt and Negri emphasize greatly, work.

**Competition**

Just as kairos has become a central concept in the capitalist world market, competition has become emphasized as well. Protagoras, a famous sophist wrote, or perhaps said, that “on every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other” (qtd. by Diogenes Laertius IX 21). We can take this to mean that for every issue there are at least two ways to look at it. Similarly, Gorgias was notorious for offering an argument for one side of an issue and then turning around and arguing the other side just as persuasively. Language and its mastery was, for the Sophists, a competition. The reason for mastering language was to win a verbal competition; here, winning means that your view of the issue was the one the audience accepted as the most persuasive. In the “Encomium of Helen,” Gorgias gives us another reason to want to master language when he writes: “speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity” (44). If one masters speech, according to Gorgias, one has at his disposal “a powerful lord;” what more could you ask for when competing?

Just as argument and the mastery of language focused on competition for the Sophists, competition is one of the forces, if not the driving force, in capitalism. The specific mode of competition in capitalism, in fact, is similar to that of Sophism. Protagoras has said that there is always more than one way to look at an issue and
that man is the measure of all things. If there is noting transcendental and all we have is the moment, which is a belief that is evidenced in Protagoras’ aphorisms here, then language is central to experience (Lanham 4). If we can know nothing beyond language, then it seems the ability to master language becomes very important. It seems that capitalism has taken a lesson straight from the Sophists. That is, just as language is the basis of Sophistic competition, the commodity is all the system of capitalism can know so it seems that competition in capitalism is measured in commodities. If we can locate the Tylenol brand in the store, for example, how far do we have to look on the shelf before we see the Bayer or Hy-Vee brands of pain reliever? In capitalism, it is all about choice, which is analogous to Progatoras’ multiple sides of the issue, even if the issue is merely minor pain relief.

So individuals compete through using language in Sophism and in capitalism, competition centers around commodities and who can sell the most and/or consume/amass the most commodities. But what does it mean to win in Sophism? Richard Lanham writes that “at the heart of rhetorical reality lies pleasure. We personify for pleasure, we act for pleasure” (7). So, according to Lanham, the Sophists compete or debate for pleasure or that which brings them pleasure. It can be argued that when we compete in capitalism, we are also competing for pleasure. While Sophists gain pleasure when their view of the issue is deemed by that audience to be the more persuasive view, in capitalism, individuals gain pleasure from our social status and from our things, and we are able to gain social status by amassing commodities and capital. Capitalism trains its subjects to want the newest thing, the fastest thing, and we are taught to equate pleasure with commodity accumulation and social status; however, capitalist competition does not only occur at the individual level. Firms must also compete, but where individuals compete to accumulate commodities, firms compete to accumulate money capital,
and where individuals compete to achieve social status, firms also compete for status by being the wealthiest firm, wealth here being money and assets combined.

So, how do firms and individuals win in capitalist competition? The secret to winning in capitalist competition really isn’t a secret at all. The Sophists knew the answer more than 2000 years before the capitalist world market emerged. The secret is kairos. An example that points to how firms in the capitalist world market use kairos to compete and win in capitalism is Toyotism, or “just-in-time production.” Hardt and Negri discuss how Toyotism is a productive model which is “striving toward a continual interactivity or rapid communication between production and consumption” (290). Rather than producing large quantities of the same commodities, in Toyotism, the goal is to be in contact with the consumers and to produce only that which is knowingly going to be consumed. This means catering to the market, or at least, pretending to cater to the consumers. Toyotism allows for more diversity among commodities produced, which in turn allows for individual competition.

Just as firms win in capitalist competition through kairos, individuals must be aware of situations if they are to win in capitalism. If one were seeking a job, for example, she would get the job by properly understanding the moment and jumping at the ad in the paper. She is supposed to be happy, because now she will have the financial means to begin amassing commodities. After working at the job for awhile, she figures out the situation, how the competition works in this particular corporation, and soon she gets a promotion. Now she is making even more money and if she is very cunning, soon she’ll be the CEO. The progression isn’t that fast in reality, but, according to bourgeois economists and apologists, supposedly in capitalism nothing should hold us back from that corner office. If we work hard
enough and really nail the kairos, we should be able to do anything we want. At least, that seems to be what the powers-that-be would have us believe.

After we master the situation (kairos) and work our way up the totem pole at work, next we begin to compete for social status. Here is where the Sophistic belief in multiple sides to an issue comes into play in capitalist competition. By having more than one TV to choose from, for example, we have the ability to get one that we can afford for now, and we are also given something to strive for: the Toshiba 32 in. flat-panel high-definition television. We compete for social status in part by amassing just the right amounts of just the right commodities, such as the Toshiba TV. But, the situation becomes complicated and kairos comes back into play here because part of the trick of achieving social status is not only being able to afford the commodity, but also being able to keep up with the trends that dictate what is “in” and what isn’t “in.” These are baseless fashions, rather than sincere needs.

Another way that kairos is heavily called upon in capitalist competition is when individuals desperate for the commodities they must have in order to achieve the social status they are taught by the system to want capitalize on sales. The idea of buying something on sale has become a new form of competition in capitalism. It isn’t only whether or not you have the newest, fastest computer, but more and more the focus extends to whether you paid the least amount possible for it. This “sale” competition is the multitude’s version of the capitalist’s game of who paid the most for what extravagance. Individuals in the capitalist system only achieve status by amassing the right commodities, sometimes at the right price. The commodities we amass and the social status the commodities give us are then our measures of pleasure.

In summary, capitalism requires individuals to amass the right commodities to achieve social status, and to amass commodities we need jobs, just as it requires
firms to accumulate money capital and status through total wealth. Individuals get jobs and get the right commodities and firms get their money capital and assets only through the Sophistic values of competition and kairos. To get the job and succeed in the job and in order to amass commodities in a way that contribute to a high or higher social status, we need to read the situation, just as firms need to be able to read the markets and be able to cater to their consumer to accumulate money capital and more assets. We are so concerned with mastering commodities and capital in capitalism because the commodity is central, just as the Sophists were concerned with mastering language because language was central. If we are able to master the central element, we are able to master a “very powerful lord,” as Gorgias said, or at least get that powerful lord on our side in the competition.

**Contradiction**

The third of Protagoras’ beliefs that parallels important trends in the capitalist world market is his claim that “contradiction is impossible” (qtd. by O’Brien 5). When this aphorism is put next to Protagoras’ claim that “on every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other,” what seems to result is nothing but contradiction. However, contradiction, as used by Protagoras, does not mean that disagreement and/or no multiplicity do not exist; rather, Protagoras’ use of contradiction refers to the lack of an independent criterion, considering his belief that humans are the source of all. In other words, there is no contradiction because there is nothing to ground competing claims outside the system of language for Protagoras. While we may have two or more views on every issue, we will never have a way to measure on view of the issue to decipher whether it is the right or wrong view on the issue, because there is no transcendent criterion we can use as a measuring stick.
But Protagoras' claim that "contradiction is impossible" applies more than to language; capitalism, like language for the Sophists, has no contradictions. There is nothing that exists, or that can exist, outside the system. In other words, anything can be commodified; therefore, anything can be subsumed into the capitalist system. Nothing exists outside the system of capital and commodity exchange, just as nothing exists outside language for the Sophists.

That nothing can exist outside the capitalist system may be the reason some theorists have announced the end of history. There is no other economic system. Capitalism has engulfed the world entirely, leading to the actualization of the world market. Hardt and Negri describe the world market in the following passage:

Many of the concepts dear to postmodernists and postcolonialists find a perfect correspondence in the current ideology of corporate capital and the world market. The ideology of the world market has always been the anti-foundational and anti-essentialist discourse par excellence. Circulation, mobility, diversity, and mixture are its very conditions of possibility. Trade brings differences together and the more the merrier! Differences (of commodities, populations, cultures, and so forth) seem to multiply infinitely in the world market, which attacks nothing more violently than fixed boundaries: it overwhelms any binary division with its infinite multiplicities. (150)

The fact that the world market ideology is anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist means that there isn't any real foundation or any external/transcendent truths upon which we can build our worldviews. Being anti-essentialist also hints towards the lack of any transcendental true essence that we can assume to be present and from which we can base our worldviews. What Hardt and Negri say, ultimately, is that in the world market, truth is very much up for grabs. Truth is established in the
world market much the way Sophists thought truth was established, through general agreement. If enough people believe it, then something must be true right? That is what the flexibility of the world market seems to allow these days.

Hardt and Negri seem to support such a reading of their take on the ideology of the world market. The reason the world market contains within it no contradictions is because of what Hardt and Negri call real subsumption. Real subsumption seems to be similar to the deterritorialization of a thing only to have that thing reterritorialized into a commodity. Hardt and Negri write that “through the real subsumption, the integration of labor into capital becomes more intensive than extensive and society is ever more completely fashioned by capital” (255). Because capitalism as an economic system has engulfed the geographic world, it has no more physical room to expand. Thus, it turns in on itself and begins the process of real subsumption. Instead of looking to an outside, capitalism looks at its parts, commodities, and breaks down those commodities and tries to put the pieces together to form new commodities. A newly published book, for example, will first be released in hard cover, and then will be released in a soft cover. Generally, when a book is first released you can get that same book on tape or CD. While the packaging may be different, consumers are still buying the same information, the content of the book. When the society is “completely fashioned by capital” (255) and anything can be a commodity, where will the contradiction arise?

What I hope to have shown in this chapter is that the theory of rhetorical situation has a definite place in the Western rhetorical tradition. This place is somewhere between Foucault and Aristotle. Also, I have explained my understanding of the relationship between sophism and capitalism, mostly that the relationship is one of conceptual similarity. In the following chapter, I discuss in detail how to move the
theory of rhetorical situation from a merely explanatory theory to a more critical
type of theory capable of intervening in the world.
CHAPTER 3. THE RHETORICAL SITUATION'S CURRENT LIMITATIONS

In chapter one, I reviewed Bitzer's theory of rhetorical situation and introduced a notable critique of the theory, raised by Vatz, which focused on the theory's inability to account for a rhetor's decision of what is exigent. However, Vatz's ultimate concern remained within the sphere of rhetoric and did not further consider the social implications that the theory and its lack of consideration for the rhetor's choice in determining exigence might have. After reviewing Bitzer's theory and Vatz' critique in the first chapter, in the second chapter I situated Bitzer's theory within the Western rhetorical tradition to call attention to two useful aspects of the theory: the theory provides a helpful heuristic for navigating an increasingly complicated realm of social relations, but it also allows for the study of contingency and situatedness, which is necessary to explore in a world governed by the commodification and consumption of the capitalist economic order.

In the third chapter, I will argue that even while Bitzer's theory allows for the contingency and situatedness that is necessary given today's social and economic order of global capitalism, the theory remains only an explanatory theory. But because the theory is focused on change, given that its central concern is how humans work to alter their environment to survive and flourish, I would like to take what is an explanatory theory and make it a critical theory capable of exacting material change in the world. What follows in this chapter is an explanation of how the theory is merely explanatory and an argument for transforming Bitzer's theory into a critical theory. My argument here will revolve around an example application of the theory, which will discuss the different exigences and impacts of the Montreal and Kyoto environmental treaties.

Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation, while a powerful explanatory tool, remains explanatory because the end of his theory is to explain how it is that some
humans harmoniously adjust to their environment, while others are forced to come to terms with their environment. However, the full impact of Bitzer's theory is limited because Bitzer neglects the important theoretical difference between explanation and change that Marx asserted in his Theses on Feuerbach: "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (German Ideology 123). More pointedly, the full application of theory must do more than interpret and explain; the application must materially affect the world. Because the rhetorical situation interprets rhetorical acts and their situations but does little itself to attempt to alter the world, it might also be said that the theory fails to avoid what Jameson calls the "overall contradiction of theory—how to advance the argument without actually saying anything" (404). For Marx, theory is serving its true purpose only when it has clear material effects. While Bitzer's theory explains how some people make changes to their environments to ensure their survival, Marx's vision of the task of theory advocates a more specific use of theory, one that critically approaches the changes resulting from rhetorical acts to question why some humans are able to harmoniously adjust to the environment while others are forced to come to terms with their environment. Such a critical theory of rhetorical situation would not accept social injustice which is sometimes associated with a capitalist society as a mere component in the environment in which the rhetorical act is occurring.

In other words, while we need to understand how to navigate communicatively in the world, we also need to be empowered with the idea that we can change the world more than what is necessary for our sheer survival. The question, then, is how humans go beyond mere survival and make the world a better place. Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation helps us, as I showed in the first and second chapters, understand the rhetorical situation's constituents, but we
need a critical theory of the rhetorical situation to negotiate the power dynamics within the situation and navigate the complexities of actual social situations in real time. In arguing for a critical theory, I propose to redefine the rhetorical situation along the lines that Horkheimer argues: critical theory describes "a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature" (54). However, while Bitzer's theory considers a specific moment with specific actors in specific material situations, and thus partially meeting Horkheimer's definition of critical theory, analysis generated from the rhetorical situation does not necessarily consider the dynamic social forces existent in the situation. Nor does such analysis necessarily consider that systematically institutionalized injustice may exist in the material environment in which the analyzed rhetorical act takes place. I contend, however, that although the rhetorical situation does not necessarily take such things into account, the theory is capable of a critical dimension because it calls for looking at materially situated moments.

The Explanatory Power of the Rhetorical Situation: Montreal versus Kyoto

The theory of rhetorical situation is useful for exploring why some rhetorical acts succeed and other fail. The following is an example of some of the analysis that may be generated from Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation, as the theory is discussed in the more detailed 1980 revision, "Functional Communication." The analysis follows a brief overview of the Montreal and Kyoto treaties and their rhetorical situations. I have included this analysis in an effort to show how powerful the theory of rhetorical situation can be in explaining the success or failure of rhetorical acts; however, at the same time, I am hoping to show that while we know something about the success and failure of the rhetorical acts, we know
nothing about what to do next. The theory merely explains what works and what does not work, but does not explain what the next step should be in an instance when an exigence which has not been remedied, *must* be remedied.

The Montreal and Kyoto treaties both address the universal exigence of global ecological crises, but Montreal is focused on the issue of ozone depletion due to emission of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), while Kyoto is concerned with global warming due to greenhouse gas emissions. While both treaties are concerned with ecological crises, an exigence for all who inhabit the Earth, only Montreal led to the alleviation of the crisis it was addressing. In "Montreal versus Kyoto," Scott Barrett discusses differences surrounding the two treaties and their respective ecological crises in his own attempt to determine why Montreal was successful while Kyoto failed. Barrett’s article was published in 1999 and more countries than he mentions have since ratified the Kyoto treaty, but my analysis focuses on the earlier years of the Kyoto treaty.

Specifically I will apply segments of the rhetorical situation that focus on the factors that affect responsiveness to exigence, particularly the factors that affect the degree of interest in an exigence. For the sake of length, I’ve limited my focus to two segments of the rhetorical situation: obligation and expectation and some of the six factors that affect degree of interest in an exigence. During my analysis I am assuming that global warming is a result of increased greenhouse gas emissions, meaning that an ecologically based policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is sound.\(^7\) In the following section I will explain the roles obligation and expectation

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\(^7\) I am not without reason for my assumption that global warming is indeed an ecological threat. Other scholars have written about their concern over the use of scientific uncertainty, a trick of the deconstructionists, to discount the threat of global warming. See Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry.* 30 Winter 2004: 225-248.
and the factors affecting the degree of interest in an exigence play in determining human responsiveness to an exigence. After each explanation, I discuss each factor in relation to the Montreal and Kyoto treaties.

**Obligation and Expectation**

Bitzer argues that an audience’s responsiveness to an exigence varies depending on whether the speaker and/or audience is obligated or expected to respond. More generally, a person may be more inclined to respond to an exigence if he/she knows that he/she is expected to respond to that exigence. For instance, if a sibling sees her brother being maltreated on the playground at school, she might be more inclined to help her brother, knowing that her parents expect her to help look after him while the children are at school. The same general logic describes Bitzer’s sense of obligation. For example, in most homes, children are taught that lying is wrong and such a belief may make a person feel obliged to reveal a liar, especially if the person believes a lie to be hurtful and thus an exigence.

But the Kyoto treaty offers a more complex example of the role obligation and expectation play in determining the responsiveness to an exigence. That is, a stipulation of the Kyoto treaty called for reduced emissions of greenhouse gases from industrial countries. One might think that, because the United States, an industrialized nation heavily dependent upon the use of fossil fuels that emit greenhouse gases, is undeniably responsible for emitting a disproportionate amount of greenhouse gases, the US would feel obligated to reduce those gases to remedy the exigence of global warming. But the United States pulled out of discussions concerning the treaty.

The lack of a clear obligation in this case to remedy the exigence may explain the results of Kyoto for the US. The Kyoto treaty did not call for emission limitations
to be set for all nations, just industrial countries and transition economies (Barrett
208). Because the US is so dependent upon fossil fuels and because not all countries
were obligated to limit emissions, the US might not have felt obligated to reduce
emissions. Furthermore, Barrett explained that because not all countries faced limits
on greenhouse gases, emissions from those nations not required to limit greenhouse
gases could make up for the reduced emissions from those nations with limits. Thus
Barrett concluded, “global emissions may fall less than if limits were imposed on all
signatories” (207). It could be suggested that perhaps the US did not feel obligated
to lower its emissions, since reduced gases in the US alone would not make a
significant difference in total global greenhouse gas levels.

Ultimately, this example illustrates how obligation to remedy the exigence of
global warming can determine the success of a rhetorical act, in this case the Kyoto
treaty. In other words, the US could have been functioning on a cost/benefit analysis
to decide to participate in the Kyoto Treaty talks, and the logic of cost/benefit
analysis creates a feeling of expectation for nations: if the costs outweigh the benefits
of action, there is no expectation that a proposed action be taken. However, if the
benefits outweigh the costs, then logically and morally a nation’s people might
expect their state to alleviate an exigence, such as global warming. In the case of the
Kyoto Treaty, the US may have seen the cost of limiting greenhouse gas emissions as
too great for the few clear benefits, thus limiting or negating any expectation that the
US participate in or take seriously the Kyoto Treaty discussion.

Degree of Interest

The degree of interest in an exigence may also in part explain the failure of
the Kyoto treaty for the US. Bitzer explains that, “other things being equal,
responsiveness [to an exigence] depends on the degree of interest experienced in the
apprehension of an exigence” (FC 31). Six factors, according to Bitzer’s detailed discussion of the rhetorical situation, affect a rhetor’s or audience’s responsiveness to an exigence: the probability of the exigence obtaining, knowing the exigence versus knowing of the exigence, nearness of the exigence in place or time, the greatness of the exigence, personal involvement in the exigence, and type of interest one takes in the exigence. For the sake of length, I will limit myself to discussing four of these in relation to the Montreal and Kyoto treaties: probability of the exigence obtaining, knowing the exigence versus knowing of the exigence, nearness of the exigence in place and time, and personal involvement in the exigence.

**Probability of an exigence obtaining.** The first factor that affects the interest level of the rhetorical situation’s participants is the probability of the factual component obtaining. Bitzer writes, “A factual condition thought improbable or unbelievable ordinarily does not solicit interest sufficient to motivate a pragmatic response” (FC 32). That is, if a person does not believe the condition that will create an exigence is likely to obtain, that person is unlikely to take interest in the exigence.

In the issue of global warming, Barrett claims that the reason for the lack of progress in implementing policy to curb global warning is “not that climate change is a more recent discovery and subject to greater uncertainties. That the world’s climate would change as concentrations of greenhouse gases increased was observed a century ago” (192). He claims instead that the Kyoto treaty failed due to a “lack of political will” (193). Where the scientific certainty wavered, then, is not in the cause of the phenomenon, but in the benefits to be seen from reducing greenhouse emissions as called for by the Kyoto treaty. In other words, the factual condition that did not obtain was not the global warming phenomenon itself; rather it was the factual condition of the possible public good that would come out of the
costly reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. There was doubt that the rates of decreased emissions called for in the Kyoto treaty would make enough of a difference to warrant the cost that such reductions would entail.

The Kyoto treaty, then, according to the rhetorical situation, may have been implemented had the audience for the treaty believed that implementing the treaty would have led to the factual condition of slowing global warming. As the Kyoto treaty is, however, the policies included do not do enough to lead nations to believe that implementing those policies will bring about the factual condition of slowing global warming. We thus see in this example that the factual condition called for in the Kyoto treaty did not convince the US and other non-signatories that the exigence of global warming could be remedied by the treaty's measures.

Knowing the factual condition of an exigence versus knowing of the factual condition of an exigence. The second factor at work in determining the degree of interest of the speaker and audience in the exigence, according to Bitzer, comes in knowing the factual condition as opposed to merely knowing of the condition. Bitzer offers the holocaust as an example of something that affects all, but whose true terror is not known by all; this distinction is evident in the difference between reading an encyclopedia's description of the events of the holocaust and reading the account of the events of the holocaust from a survivor such as Elie Wiesel. Bitzer concludes that "generally interest will increase insofar as the factual condition is known directly and sensibly, or through vivid representation" (FC 32). For a factual condition to be known directly and/or sensibly, one must either see first hand or somehow vividly experience the condition.

The difference between knowing and knowing of an exigence may explain the failure of the Kyoto treaty in the US. That is, it is generally agreed that global
warming and ozone depletion are "global in that all countries emit ozone-depleting substances and greenhouse gases, all are affected by such emissions and effective management of those problems requires cooperation involving many if not all countries" (Barrett 192). Thus, all know they are affected by the exigence of the ecological crises of ozone depletion and global warming. Yet only the Montreal treaty's policy concerning ozone depletion, in contrast to Kyoto's policy, has been implemented. The condition of vividly knowing the factual condition of an exigence may explain why the Montreal treaty has been ratified in the United States, as well as in most other nations, whereas the Kyoto treaty has only in 2005, nearly a decade after its introduction, been ratified by enough nations to make it legally binding. Importantly, according to BBC News, even in 2005 "the world's top polluter, the US, has not signed onto the treaty" (par.4).

Montreal's success outshines Kyoto's, I contend, because not all countries truly knew the factual condition of global warming in the way that all knew of the factual condition of global warming. For instance, some nations felt the threat of global warming more vividly than others, especially those already having difficulty growing crops for food, while other nations' natural resources made global temperature change less of a threat. Specifically, the US may see depleted crop production, but will likely produce enough to sustain its livelihood, and thus may not know the factual condition of global warming in the same way a nation with a smaller amount of arable land knows the factual condition of global warming.

Accordingly, the United States and its people will not be as interested in the exigence of global warming or in implementing costly policies that may reduce emissions of the gases that cause global warming. The cost-benefit analysis considered during the Montreal treaty talks, on the other hand, illustrates how the United States will know the factual condition of ozone depletion; Barrett writes that
cost-benefit analyses "found that by 2165 implementation of the Montreal Protocol would avoid more than 245 million US cancer cases and more than 5 million early deaths" (200). It is apparent from Barrett’s figures that the United States saw an interest in working to stop ozone depletion, which was probably a factor that led to the US’s implementation of the Montreal Protocol. In this example, knowing a factual condition generated more interest for the audience of a rhetorical act than the amount of interest generated by merely knowing of a factual condition.

**Temporal/spatial relationship to exigence.** The temporal/spatial location of an exigence may shed some more light on why the Montreal and Kyoto treaties had such different results. Bitzer distinguishes between location and time and explains that if an exigence can be shown to occur within the near future and physically close to the audience, that exigence will be interest the audience.

The temporal/spatial factor can be cited in the early failure of the Kyoto treaty. That is, the results of the reductions in greenhouse gas emissions that the treaty called for were not clearly shown to ensure a positive resolution of the problem of global warming. The results were simply too uncertain and would be seen too many years down the road to justify to the signatory nations the actions the Kyoto Treaty called for. The time and location of an exigence in this example factored into the interest the signatory nations took in the exigence and its remedy.

**Personal involvement with an exigence.** The fourth and last factor I will discuss that decides interest in an exigence is the extent to which the exigence will personally affect the audience. Bitzer explains that an "exigence that involves [the] speaker or audience personally will generate more interest than one in which they are not directly involved" (FC 32). Barrett’s article as a whole offers a fitting
example for this factor. "Montreal versus Kyoto" focuses partly on the economics of ozone depletion and global warming, wherein cost-benefit analysis is the basis of deciding environmental policy. Importantly, cost-benefit analysis exemplifies the way nations determine their individual interest and involvement in a given situation.

In general, Barrett revealed that when benefits for the US were shown to outweigh the costs significantly, the US took positive action, as is the case with the Montreal Treaty. On the other hand, Barrett showed that the Kyoto Treaty posed too many costs and offered too few benefits for the US to pursue. In this cost-benefit logic, we see the ways in which the rhetorical situation hinges on the role personal interests, or in this case, of individual nations, play in responsiveness to an exigence.

In the four factors that decide the audience's interest in an exigence, and in the theory's explanation of the Montreal and Kyoto treaties' results, the applicability of Bitzer's theory to current rhetorical acts is evident. That is, in delineating the features of the rhetorical situation, the theory can explain why some rhetorical acts succeed while others fail. In this case, the analysis demonstrated why the Montreal treaty was readily ratified while the Kyoto treaty had little success.

The Social End of the Rhetorical Situation and What Might Lurk beneath the Theory's Surface

However, as I have said, Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation can be more significantly useful if it is moved beyond its explanatory function and is made to be a critical theory. To move in this direction, the rhetorical situation, and the above analysis generated from its application, can be compared to Marx’s analysis of capitalism in sections two and three of the first volume of *Capital*. In these chapters, Marx assesses wage labor and admits that, on the surface, the laborer and the
employer appear to be free and equal co-subjects, willingly making a contract in which both parties benefit and are content. Similarly, the rhetorical situation as Bitzer has written it seems to account for enough of the rhetorical situation to have significant explanatory power, but only as long as we leave the situation itself in tact. That is, Marx thought there might be more to capital than what is apparent, due to the inability of “free and equal exchange” to explain surplus value, which, he discovers, is based on the inherent exploitation of the wage laborer. As Marx does in Capital, we must dig below the apparent “situation” of the rhetorical situation to understand the capacity for rhetors to perform effective rhetorical acts.

Generally, we must look carefully beneath the surface of rhetorical acts and their apparent situations in order to move the rhetorical situation towards a more critical rhetorical theory. By doing so, we can dismantle the ground of the rhetorical situation itself and analyze the root causes of exigencies. While on the surface it would seem that Bitzer has accounted for the factors affecting responsiveness to an exigence, perhaps if we reconsider the theory knowing that rhetorical acts take place in a specific economic and social system (i.e., capitalism), we find that additional components factor into the rhetorical situation.

Looking beneath the surface may thus require us to adopt new categories in the rhetorical situation. For instance, not only do we need to look at the degree of interest a person has in an exigence or the audience’s temporal/spatial relation to the exigence, but we also need to consider the rhetor’s and audience’s economic, social, cultural, and political position. While Bitzer’s theory begins to consider the relationship between speaker and audience, such consideration would allow for categories that take into account the situation’s social totality by considering the rhetor’s and audience’s place within that totality and the effects that social placement have on understanding the exigence. Categories that take into account
the cultural and socio-economic roles of the rhetor and audience, I argue, can lead
Bitzer’s theory towards Horkheimer’s critical theory, in which the rhetor’s
relationships to the audience and the social whole are central.

Considering a rhetor’s or audience’s place in the social totality can reveal the
political, social, and economic power of these people to allow for more complete
analysis. Such analysis, which takes into account the rhetor’s social orientation, can
more clearly reveal why a rhetorical act attempting to remove an exigence might fail
and leave the rhetor merely to come to terms with his/her environment. To
understand the rhetorical situation as completely as possible, I propose to read
Bitzer’s theory with an emphasis on its social characteristics, which would render a
more useful reading of Bitzer’s theory.

The beginning of this critical reading of Bitzer’s theory can be found in
Bitzer’s own description of his rhetorical theory. Bitzer defines rhetoric’s social role,
as presented in “Functional Communication,” as a “function, or pragmatic, [form of]
communication and thus a critical mode of functional interaction in which the chief
interacting grounds are persons on the one hand and the environment on the other”
(FC 21). In other words, rhetoric is a tool used to facilitate the relations between
humans and their surroundings, and his theory of the rhetorical situation seeks to
explain those relations.

In short, the rhetorical situation is centered on change. This focus can be seen
in the rhetorical situation’s components, especially exigence. This need for
adjustment to the environment is what Bitzer calls “a problem or defect, something
other than it should be” (FC 23). Bitzer claims in “Functional Communication” that
“our existence and well-being depend upon skillful and ongoing adjustments to, or
modifications of, our environment\textsuperscript{8} (FC 22, emphasis added). In other words, the human population only survives and flourishes through changing to suit the environment. Exigence and the alleviation of exigence, through changes in the material and social environment, are thus necessary components of the rhetorical situation.

Moreover, the rhetorical situation exists only when humans attempt to modify or alleviate an exigence through discourse, making such modifications and alleviations public. In fact, Bitzer's rhetorical situation contains additional constituents beyond exigence that reveal the social nature of his theory: audience and constraints. Bitzer's theory requires an audience because "only by means of [the audience's] mediating influence can the exigence be modified," but he admits that because we as humans "address ourselves pragmatically," the "self is sometimes rhetor and audience" (FC 23). Both the audience and the constraints emphasize the social nature of the rhetorical situation.

The constituent of audience is therefore public, though Bitzer admits that people can be both rhetor and audience. While the audience is obviously public and social when it exists beyond the rhetoric itself, what really makes the audience social is the way exigence is socially created. I will discuss in more detail the social nature of exigence later. But let me say here that constraints, those things "capable of influencing the rhetor and an audience" (FC 23), are public only insofar as humans have access to the particular constraints allowed by their socio-economic status. For instance, because I do not have the money, an important constraint, necessary to publicize and stage a concert in an effort to raise awareness of global warming, I am

\textsuperscript{8} It is important to know, especially in a discussion including Marx's ideas, what Bitzer means by environment and situation. There are two different components to Bitzer's total environment: the mental environment, which consists of "ideals, images, meanings, symbols, laws, rules, conventions, attitudes, feelings, interests, and aspirations" (22 FC), and the physical environment. It is the total environment that Bitzer is referring to when he uses the term "environment" and it is the total environment that humans perpetually interact with and change.
not as able to help alleviate global warming through discourse. I am, instead, left to my own devices, such as recycling, walking to work, and possibly maintaining a website, all of which might do little good to alleviate global warming. We see from this example that socio-economic status plays a role in a rhetor's exposure to constraints, thus making constraints public, but also differential among actors.

Though the rhetorical situation's two primary constituents, audience and constraints, are public, the third constituent of the rhetorical situation, exigence, is what makes the rhetorical situation especially public and social. Exigence is social because, importantly, it is through socialization that we determine the way our environment is supposed to appear. Moreover, Bitzer's theory accounts for the role socio-economic status plays in determining exigence when he writes that we recognize problems or exigences because of a "fundamental proposition grounded in individual and collective experience: that the environment and persona invite change" (FC 26). In other words, we see something is amiss in the environment from our individual and collective experience of that environment. In fact, Bitzer goes on to explain that "an exigence is an imperfection marked by some degree of urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something to be corrected. It is necessarily related to interested and valuations" (FC 26). Thus, not only is there an individual and collective experience to draw from when determining exigence, but the urgency of an exigence is determined by our values and interests, both of which are socialized into us. This allows a space for a discussion of socio-economic status in the rhetorical situation. The differential effects a person's socio-economic status might have on determining what is exigent can be seen in the following example. A person faced with the exigence of famine will urgently desire an alteration in his/her environment, such as rain that enables crops to grow, thus enabling that person to eat; at the same time, a middle-school child from suburban Iowa may urgently
desire an alteration in his/her environment that allows him/her the ability to purchase the newest video game so that he/she can hang out with the popular kids. In terms of exigence, we see that the starving person needs food to survive, while the child desires the newest game merely for the social benefits the game would bring; the person wanting food is merely driven by that person's desire to live, while the child's need for the newest game is driven by the value that the child places on being popular. These are entirely different exigencies, but what we see in this example is that our material environment, especially our socio-economic status, plays a large role in determining exactly what we as humans consider to be an exigence, or that which is other than it should be. That is, the different desires of the starving person and the suburban child are more than mere matters of different perspectives or goals; the different exigencies are determined in large part by socio-economic status.

Generally, because socio-economic situation plays a significant role in determining what a person holds as valuable or necessary, or exigent, the rhetorical situation's constituent of exigence is primarily social. Bitzer's consideration of the factors that determine human responsiveness to exigence, moreover, allow a relativity in defining what is exigent from situation to situation. He lists many influences that affect how humans respond to exigencies, including: modification capability, risk, obligation and expectation, familiarity and confidence, immediacy, and degree of interest, which has six factors that impact the level of interest. The point to note here is that these factors affecting response to exigencies are socially structured and differentiated from person to person.

The last aspect of Bitzer's theory relevant to my discussion of the social nature of the rhetorical situation is a distinction Bitzer makes concerning the role rhetoric plays in aiding society. At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Bitzer to
discuss the purpose of rhetorical acts, which is to answer how it is that humans “harmoniously adjust” to their environment. Until now in the discussion of the social aspects of the rhetorical situation, *adjustment* in the form of alleviation of exigence through altering the environment has been defined as rhetoric’s goal; however, Bitzer notes that “we come to terms with the environment and ourselves” (FC 38). The language of coming to terms is important here: it seems there may be two scenarios that can occur in any rhetorical situation: harmonious adjustment with or of the environment, or coming to terms with the environment.

In Bitzer’s theory, I argue, one who harmoniously adjusts is one whose exigence is solved through the modification of the environment, while one who comes to terms with the environment does so because the exigence arises out of an environmental disagreement that appears to be irreconcilable. Moreover, the difference between these two types of outcomes varies along socio-economic divisions. The socio-economic status of an individual in any rhetorical situation is merely part of that individual’s environment, and Figure 1 shows the relationship between socio-economic status and “harmonious adjustment” or “coming to terms” with the environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lower Socio-Economic Status</th>
<th>Constraints</th>
<th>Higher Socio-Economic Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited control over constraints</td>
<td>[----]</td>
<td>Greater control over constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience difficulty rallying an audience, due to a lack in social status as a result of having a lower socio-economic status</td>
<td>[----]</td>
<td>Greater command over audience because of maintenance of the means of production and means of alleviation of exigence through control of constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer exigences solved because of lack of access to constraints, which limits ability to move audiences through discourse to alleviate exigences</td>
<td>[----]</td>
<td>More exigences solved, which allows for “harmonious adjustment” to the environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Constituents of the rhetorical situation in relation to socio-economic status
Figure 1 illustrates that some must merely come to terms with their environment because their exigences are not alleviated and that this outcome tends to happen to individuals with a lower socio-economic status. Consider the example of those fighting against the ecological crises of global warming: many of these individuals must come to terms with their exigence because it is not being solved through alterations to the environment. John Bellamy Foster, in *The Vulnerable Planet*, describes this coming to terms:

As long as prevailing social relations remain unquestioned, those who are concerned about what is happening are left with few visible avenues for environmental action other than purely personal commitments to recycling and green shopping, socially untenable choices between jobs and the environment, or broad appeals to corporations, political policymakers, and the scientific establishment—the very interests most responsible for the current ecological mess. (12)

In other words, environmentalists who see an exigence in the ecological crises of the world are only able to come to terms with their environment because they do not have access to the constraints or the audiences needed to alter the environment in a way that would allow for harmonious adjustment. For environmentalists, as Foster explains, those who have the access to constraints and the ability to gather and hold an audience, both of which are necessary to make needed changes to the environment, are the very people whose individual interests prevent them from doing so. In explicitly Marxist terms, those who have access to the constraints and the audiences are those who create the hegemony of the current social system, capitalism, which tends to resist environmentalist action.

In my analysis of the rhetorical situations of the Montreal and Kyoto treaties, I illustrated the significant role the rhetorical situation plays in the different
successes of these two rhetorical acts, broadly defined. While both treaties seem to be responding to similar exigences, global ecological crises, the treaties took two very different paths. All of the reasons for the treaties' different fates cannot be known, but the path each treaty took was likely was affected by each treaty's rhetorical situation, and part of what was different about the rhetorical situations of the two treaties were the industries the treaties' policies would affect. The power differential between the two industries was one of the biggest differences between the rhetorical situations of the two treaties.

After placing the theory of rhetorical situation between Aristotle and Foucault due to the theory's ability to work as an applicable heuristic and yet is capable of working in contingency and situatedness and having shown the power of the theory of rhetorical situation to explain the success and failures of the rhetorical acts of Montreal and Kyoto treaties, I moved on to discuss a second reading of the theory of rhetorical situation. The second reading calls for digging below the surface of the rhetorical situation in an effort to reveal more constituents, such as cultural norms, socio-economic factors, etc., that play a role in the success or failure of rhetorical acts. I argue that such a deeper, more involved reading of the theory of rhetorical situation must be considered given the unique moment of global capitalism.

Specifically, what we may learn about rhetorical acts from a rhetorical analysis generated from the application of an expanded rhetorical situation is that there are simply social hurdles that disallow for the resolution of exigences for specific persons or groups. For instance, we might have learned through an expanded analysis of the rhetorical situations of the Montreal and Kyoto treaties that the economic power of the industries involved effect what policies those in political
power in the US will subscribe to through means of lobbying and PACs. Marx saw institutionalized systemic injustice in the exploitation that capitalism induces; for our part, an expanded rhetorical situation may help us seek out those injustices, call attention to them, and thus find ways of making significant changes in the social system itself that can ease or, in the best of worlds, eradicate the injustices.
WORKS CITED


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