‘Strangers in their own Country’: Epideictic Rhetoric and Communal Definition in Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ Speech

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Abstract: This article treats Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech as an example of the epideictic rhetoric of blame and exclusion. Drawing on a framework proposed by Celeste Michelle Condit, the analysis explores the functions of the address for the speaker and for the audience. Of particular concern are Powell’s self-presentation as a statesman and prophet; his account of the impact and consequences of unrestricted immigration; and his portrayal of a community where ordinary, decent English people were being displaced and victimised by Commonwealth immigrants – a process in which he claimed the authorities were complicit. For the audience, the speech gave public expression to their concerns about immigration, though Powell’s predictions of a dystopian future also aroused sentiments of anger and foreboding. Despite the controversy that ensued, the impact of ‘Rivers of Blood’ was far-reaching, and its influence is still apparent in contemporary debates over immigration.

Keywords: Enoch Powell; rhetoric; immigration; ‘race’; community; national identity

According to Aristotle, the function of rhetoric is ‘to detect what is persuasive and what is apparently persuasive’. To facilitate this task he identified three genres of rhetoric, which in turn correspond to three types of audience that are to be persuaded. The first branch is deliberative rhetoric, which seeks to persuade listeners to take – or turn away from – a particular course of action. This type of rhetoric predominates in legislatures, where
politicians express their support for, or opposition to, a policy based on its anticipated impact on society. The second is forensic (or ‘judicial’) rhetoric, which is concerned with prosecution and defence. As the name suggests this mode is primarily employed in a court of law, where the prosecution and the defence make claims about events that occurred in the past. The third is epideictic (or ‘display’) rhetoric, which is the least defined of the three genres. This branch is associated with praise and blame, and it features heavily in occasions such as dedication ceremonies, acceptance speeches and commencement addresses. The display orator’s temporal focus is the present, though Aristotle notes that ‘they also make additional use of historical recollection or anticipatory conjecture’. A case in point is the funeral oration, as it draws on the past in order to pay tribute to the deceased.

More recently, scholars have modified the Aristotelian conception of epideictic rhetoric to incorporate the articulation of shared values, which themselves provide a basis for attributing praise or blame. In turn, these invocations of social norms facilitate the (re)definition of community. Celeste Michelle Condit, for instance, argues that epideictic serves three functional pairs, the components of which correspond to the speech’s function for the speaker and for the audience. The first of these pairs is display/entertainment, whereby an orator’s eloquence may ‘entertain’ their listeners. Meanwhile, the second is definition/understanding, which refers to the speaker’s power to explain a troubling situation and, in so doing, to provide reassurance. Finally, the third – related – functional pair is ‘shaping/sharing of community’, which acknowledges the role of epideictic in constructing a collective self-image and reinforcing a common identity.

At first sight, Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech appears antithetical to this conception of epideictic rhetoric. After all, it was intended not to comfort his audience, but to alert them to the ‘troubles’ that he believed lay ahead. Furthermore, instead of seeking to unite the citizenry around common ideals and a shared identity, Powell called attention to the differences between the ‘existing population’ and ‘Commonwealth immigrants’. In short, the purpose of his address was to unsettle and divide. While Condit acknowledges this ‘dark side’, noting that ‘definitions of community are often advanced by contrast with “others” outside of the community’, studies of epideictic typically focus on the rhetoric of praise, as
opposed to blame. The present article makes a distinctive contribution to this scholarship by treating Powell’s address as an example of the *epideictic* of exclusion. To this end, it considers in turn the three functional pairs identified by Condit, paying particular attention to their role in communal definition and the ‘othering’ of the immigrant population.

**Display/entertainment**

As noted above, the display/entertainment function is concerned with eloquence which, on Condit’s view, audiences ‘rightfully take…as a sign of leadership’. Powell is widely regarded as a gifted orator, and Iain McLean explains his appeal as follows:

‘The name; his unmistakable accent, which seemed to move from the Birmingham of his birth to the Black Country of his constituency; and his equally distinctive piercing blue eyes, formal clothes and black hat, made an unforgettable combination. The inimitable accent added further force to his doom-laden speeches.’

Also important was Powell’s rhetorical style, which combined popular phraseology and classical erudition, anecdotal evidence and objective data. For Jonathan Charteris-Black, this strategy – together with the high degree of authority with which he spoke – enabled Powell to portray himself as ‘the voice of “The Oracle”’, an image that was reinforced by his ability to define the situation facing his community and to make predictions about the future.

In the opening section of the speech, Powell sought to establish his authority and lay the groundwork for his prophecies. Thus, he told his listeners that ‘the supreme function of statesmanship is to provide against preventable evils’, the discussion of which is ‘the most unpopular and at the same time the most necessary occupation for the politician’. After all,
Powell elaborated, ‘people are disposed to mistake predicting troubles for causing troubles and even for desiring troubles’. The unspecified ‘evils’ are, of course, the consequences of immigration and, by confronting this highly contentious issue head-on, he came across as a lone voice in the wilderness, or in Douglas Hurd’s terms a ‘solitary prophet’, warning the nation of the dangers ahead.⁸ There was a moral dimension to this, as Powell believed he was duty-bound as a statesman to express his concerns and that therefore he should not be condemned for doing so. This is clear from his final sentence, which stated: ‘All I know is that to see, and not to speak, would be the great betrayal’.

According to Andrew Crines, Tim Heppell and Michael Hill, a further salient aspect of Powell’s political performance was his self-presentation as ‘the protector of the ordinary English and the guardian of national heritage and institutions’. Here, it is worth noting Charteris-Black’s observation that Powell positioned himself as a defender of ‘England’ – as opposed to ‘Britain’ – and that, in this capacity, he was ‘able to crystallise fears that originated in the response to the social and political changes arising from the experience of loss of Empire’. In so doing, Charteris-Black continues, Powell adopted the right-wing rhetorical strategy of amplifying the ‘emotional appeal of resistance to invasion’. This approach was founded on the belief that a strong sense of self-identification enabled the nation to thrive and, as Philip Norton puts it, that this would be ‘diluted, indeed lost, if there was an influx into large conurbations of people without that sense of identity’.⁹

In his self-appointed role as the protector of England, Charteris-Black observes that Powell demonstrated a willingness to say the unsayable, to pose the questions he maintained that ‘people were too embarrassed, too afraid or too ashamed to ask overtly because of the taboos surrounding open discussion of issues of race’. With this in mind, it seems that Powell did not so much entertain his audience as provide gratification by articulating their deep-seated concerns. In other words, the speech functioned as a pressure valve, an (albeit temporary) outlet for the built-up fear and resentment that Powell believed was felt in those areas which were experiencing high levels of immigration. By giving voice to these apparently widely-held sentiments, which had hitherto been ignored by the government, Powell employed the populist technique of pitting ‘the people’ against an elite. However, it is inaccurate to class
Powell himself as a populist. As Jan-Werner Müller explains, a populist actor ‘does not have to “embody” the people…but a sense of direct connection and identification needs to be there’. Such a bond is conspicuously absent from Powell’s rhetoric, given that he neither aligned himself with, nor claimed to speak for, ‘the people’. Instead, he maintained a distance from them through his use of remote language (cf. ‘they found…’), which in turn ‘served to contribute to the myth of the oracle’.10

**Definition/understanding**

The ability to provide a definition of social reality enhances the authority of a speaker and, as Charteris-Black points out, Powell devoted much of his speech to ‘communicating the setting and outlining the nature of the problem’.11 Thus, he took as his starting point the assumption that the influx of migrants was unprecedented, such that in some areas it was bringing about ‘the total transformation to which there is no parallel in a thousand years of English history’. Indeed, Powell went on, the Registrar General’s Office expected that, ‘in 15 or 20 years, on present trends, there will be in this country three and a half million Commonwealth immigrants and their descendants’. While there was no equivalent figure for the year 2000, he predicted that ‘it must be in the region of five to seven million… Whole areas, towns and parts of towns across England will be occupied by sections of the immigrant and immigrant-descended population’ (see James Hampshire’s article in this collection for an assessment of the validity of these statistics). In the expectation that the latter group’s numbers would dramatically increase, Powell then urged ‘just that kind of action which is hardest for politicians to take, action where the difficulties lie in the present but the evils to be prevented or minimised lie several parliaments ahead’.

To emphasise the scale of the challenge confronting politicians, Powell drew on the experience of his own constituency, claiming that ‘at this moment 20 or 30 additional immigrant children are arriving from overseas in Wolverhampton alone every week – and that means 15 or 20 additional families a decade or two hence’. For Powell, the nation’s
decision to permit an annual inflow of around 50,000 dependants indicated that it had taken leave of its senses, prompting him to warn that: ‘Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad’. Through this classical proverb, he presented unfettered immigration as the first step towards destruction, as analogous to ‘watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre’. In making this vivid prediction, Powell appealed to the emotions of his audience (the technique of pathos) in an effort to induce feelings of fear, and so persuade them to support his calls for action. Thus, his epideictic of blame offered no reassurance to those concerned about immigration and its consequences, while serving to heighten their anxieties through its depictions of a dystopian future.

According to Powell, the supporters of laws against discrimination (specifically, the 1968 Race Relations Bill) entertained a ‘misconception of the realities’ akin to that of certain newspapers in the 1930s, which ‘year after year…tried to blind this country to the rising peril which confronted it’. He then proceeded to correct this supposedly false understanding by alleging that it was not the immigrant population who experienced deprivation and prejudice, but ‘those among whom they have come and are still coming’. With this in mind, he claimed, the enactment of this law would ‘risk throwing a match on to gunpowder’. Powell’s analogy recalls his earlier warning that a failure to drastically reduce levels of immigration was tantamount to national self-immolation, while implying that the advocates of the Bill were complicit in bringing about such an outcome. Quoting Jesus’s words from the cross, Powell then damned these individuals with faint praise, stating that ‘the kindest thing that can be said about those who propose and support it is that they know not what they do’.

Also culpable were the proponents of integration, an approach that Powell characterised as ‘the other dangerous delusion from which those who are wilfully or otherwise blind to realities suffer’. Expanding on this criticism, he claimed that integration is difficult for immigrants who have ‘marked physical differences, especially of colour’ but, given time, it is nonetheless possible. Indeed, Powell noted that many thousands of the Commonwealth immigrants who had come to Britain over the past 15 years were eager to integrate. However, he argued, ‘to imagine that such a thing enters the heads of a great and growing majority of immigrants and their descendants is a ludicrous misconception, and a dangerous
one’. Like his condemnation of the Race Relations Bill, this attack was consistent with what Charteris-Black describes as Powell’s ‘general world view of the inherent evil of mixing people of different races’. In turn, such a conception informed his self-presentation as the protector of England’s people and traditions against this purported foreign invasion.

In his critique of anti-discrimination laws and integration, Powell portrayed the supporters of these initiatives as labouring under a misconception; they had manifestly failed to grasp the severity of the situation and were unwittingly hastening the nation’s destruction. In contrast, Paul Chilton writes, Powell’s definition was founded on the proposition that he had ‘better knowledge, recognition of the “real” facts’, and so [was] ‘more “rational”, more “objective”, even more advanced in his mode of thought than rivals or adversaries’. This belief was equally evident in Powell’s assertion that the question of how to reduce immigration was ‘simple and rational’, as indeed were its answers. As he explained, the solution entailed ‘stopping, or virtually stopping, further inflow, and ... promoting the maximum outflow’, both of which were part of official Conservative Party policy. Powell thereby sought to undermine the credibility of his opponents, while bolstering his own legitimacy by depicting himself as the ‘voice of reason’. This epistemic claim was supported by facts and statistics (the rhetorical appeal to *logos*) which, on Chilton’s view, Powell presumed ‘the hearer would accept as authoritative’. At the same time, Powell’s predictions reinforced his image as a prophet, one of the few who could see into the future and, moreover, was prepared to accept the risks associated with speaking out.13

**Shaping/sharing of community**

The definition/understanding function of *epideictic* rhetoric is closely connected to the shaping/sharing of community, which is achieved through public affirmations of communal identity and traditions. However, as Condit correctly points out, such definitions are frequently advanced by creating contrasts with ‘others’ who do not belong to the community, the result of which is that:
‘A sharing of community may not include all individuals who, territorially, might live within the boundaries of the community. In giving a speaker the right to shape the definition of the community, the audience gives the speaker the right to select certain values, stories, and persons from the shared heritage and to promote them over others.’

It is through this process of selection that a speaker can exclude certain individuals or groups from their definition of the community. This strategy is clearly evident in the ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, where Powell not only distanced himself from other people, but also articulated his philosophy of racial separatism.

In constructing his narrative of social division, Powell contrasted the nation’s treatment of immigrants with that of its own people. Thus, he told his listeners that:

‘While, to the immigrant, entry to this country was admission to privileges and opportunities eagerly sought, the impact upon the existing population was very different. For reasons which they could not comprehend, and in pursuance of a decision by default, on which they were never consulted, they found themselves made strangers in their own country.’

To illustrate his argument, Powell claimed that the native English ‘found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places…their plans and prospects for the future defeated’. Though he never stated it directly, Chilton observes that the audience can plausibly infer that ‘the agents of change, of neglect, etc., are either the politicians criticised by Powell or the immigrants themselves’. Irrespective of culpability the consequences were the same, namely the displacement and victimisation of
the existing population, which in turn served to fuel the in-group’s hostility towards immigrants and their trepidations about the future.

A striking feature of Powell’s *epideictic* of exclusion was his use of the ‘anecdotal testimony of an “ordinary” person…as an authority and as a proof of a more general political point’. Thus, he repeatedly praised the ‘ordinary, decent, sensible [English] people’ who had voiced their concerns about immigration, and treated their particular stories as representative of what ‘thousands and hundreds of thousands are saying and thinking’. One such example was a conversation with a constituent, whom Powell described as a ‘middle-aged, quite ordinary working man employed in one of our nationalised industries’. A father of three, he expressed a desire for his children to settle abroad, claiming that ‘in this country in 15 or 20 years’ time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man’. This view was congruent with Powell’s predictions of future ‘evils’, according to which unfettered immigration would result in large swathes of England being ‘occupied’ by an ‘alien element’. In turn, the claim that the existing population would be subjugated served to foster division by presenting these ‘others’ as a direct threat to the nation and its way of life.

Whereas this anecdote gave additional force to Powell’s prophesies concerning the impact of immigration on the national community, a second called attention to its detrimental effects on an individual citizen. Here, Powell again drew on his narrative of victimisation in an attempt to arouse feelings of fear and anger in his audience, while inviting them to sympathise with the protagonist. The story was taken from a letter and it centred on an elderly white woman from Wolverhampton, who had turned her home into a boarding house following the death of her husband and sons in World War II. This woman was a pillar of society, as she ‘worked hard and did well, paid off her mortgage and began to put something by for her old age’. Once immigrants started to move into her street, however, her quiet neighbourhood became ‘a place of noise and confusion’ and her white tenants moved away. Because of her refusal to rent rooms to immigrant families, the woman’s savings ran out and she went to apply for a rate reduction. After she had explained her situation, the ‘young girl’ in the office told her that ‘racial prejudice won’t get you anywhere in this country’, and so she went home.
Powell then turned from the economic hardship experienced by the elderly woman to her emotional suffering, reporting that ‘the telephone is her lifeline. Her family pay the bill, and help her out as best they can’. Such assistance was necessary, he explained, because:

‘She is becoming afraid to go out. Windows are broken. She finds excreta pushed through her letter box. When she goes to the shops, she is followed by children, charming, wide-grinning piccaninnies. They cannot speak English, but one word they know. “Racialist”, they chant.’

Indeed, Powell went on, ‘when the new Race Relations Bill is passed, this woman is convinced she will go to prison. And is she so wrong? I begin to wonder’. For Powell, the many hundreds of letters he had received since he last spoke about immigration indicated that this was far from an isolated example. As such, he argued, ‘the sense of being a persecuted minority which is growing among ordinary English people in the areas of the country which are affected is something that those without direct experience can hardly imagine’.

In this account, the woman was praised as respectable and hardworking, a war widow whose sons had sacrificed their lives for their country. Likewise, Powell (and his correspondent) conferred a positive evaluation on ‘the family solidarity of the in-group’, and so invited his audience to empathise with their plight. However, he then employed the epideictic of blame to contrast their decent conduct with what Charteris-Black refers to as the ‘exploitative practices, as well as verbal and physical abuse, perpetuated by an out-group’. By presenting the woman’s story as typical, he continues, Powell made it into a ‘social myth with persuasive force’. Thus, the ‘noise and confusion’ the immigrants brought to her community became representative of their impact on other areas of the country: they were to be seen as a disruptive force with values and standards of behaviour that were fundamentally incompatible with those of the domestic population. On this basis, it is perhaps not too much of a leap to see the ‘young girl’ in the rates office as symbolic of the supporters of integration.
and the Race Relations Bill who, Powell believed, had misunderstood the challenges facing the nation and were complicit in bringing about its destruction.

Powell concluded his speech with another prediction, telling his audience that ‘we are on the verge here of a change’. Whereas previously integration had been unattainable for the majority of immigrants due to their circumstances and background, he warned that:

‘Now we are seeing the growth of positive forces acting against integration, of vested interests in the preservation and sharpening of racial and religious differences, with a view to the exercise of actual domination, first over fellow-immigrants and then over the rest of the population.’

These ‘positive forces’ were again unspecified, but the clear implication was that they came from within the immigrant communities themselves. Furthermore, this impulse towards division had already taken root in Wolverhampton where, on Powell’s view, it appeared to be spreading fast. The danger, therefore, was not simply the displacement of the existing population but its wholesale subjugation; in Charteris-Black’s words, a ‘role reversal in which “black” becomes “white”’ and ‘what is taken to be the natural order of things’ is usurped.18

To strengthen his argument further while demonstrating that his position had cross-party support, Powell quoted with approval the words of the Labour Minister John Stonehouse:

‘The Sikh communities’ campaign to maintain customs inappropriate in Britain is much to be regretted... To claim special communal rights (or should one say rites?) leads to a dangerous fragmentation within
society. This communalism is a canker; whether practised by one colour or another it is to be strongly condemned.’

Stonehouse’s metaphor of a canker (a fungal disease) is worthy of note, as it depicts communalism as an infection that will eventually overwhelm the body politic. In the same vein, Powell described the Race Relations Bill as ‘the very pabulum [that these ‘dangerous and divisive elements’] need to flourish’, on the ground it supplied them with the ‘legal weapons’ necessary to achieve domination. This battle would be hard-fought and the prospect filled Powell with dread, causing him to warn his audience – in a misquotation of the *Aeneid* – that: ‘like the Roman, I seem to see “the River Tiber foaming with much blood”’.

**Conclusion**

Taking Condit’s framework as a starting point, this article has treated Powell’s speech as an example of the *epideictic* of exclusion. The analysis shows that, in common with conventional *epideictic* oratory, Powell demonstrated his leadership abilities through a display of eloquence. Here, he played the role of a statesman, who was carrying out his national duty by warning of the perils of unrestricted immigration from the Commonwealth. However, Powell also presented himself as a prophet, as one of the few who – unlike the ‘deluded’ advocates of the Race Relations Bill and integration – could see that the nation was bringing about its own destruction. Meanwhile, in portraying a community in which the influx of immigrants had disrupted established ways of life, Powell praised the decency of ordinary English people and treated their stories as typical. By contrast, immigrants were criticised as the beneficiaries of a ‘one-way privilege’, who had proceeded to displace the existing population. Worse, he claimed, their refusal to integrate would result in the eventual subjugation of the native English, an outcome in which the authorities were complicit by virtue of their advocacy of anti-discrimination laws. For his audience Powell’s address served to arouse feelings of resentment and foreboding, so it is perhaps not surprising that, as
Nick Hillman reports, an opinion poll conducted in its aftermath showed that racial tensions had increased.

The legacy of Powell’s speech is somewhat mixed. His most infamous prediction – that unfettered immigration would lead to a race war, which in turn would see the streets of Britain ‘foaming with much blood’ – has not materialised and, according to Sally Tomlinson, the 86 per cent of the settled population of England and Wales identified as ‘white’ (which now includes migrants from the EU) in the 2011 census ‘presumably still [holds] the “whip hand”’ over the 14 per cent who identify as Asian, Black or Mixed Race. Nevertheless, the language of the Leave campaign in the run-up to the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union contained elements that were redolent of Powell’s address. A notorious example is the UK Independence Party’s ‘Breaking Point’ poster, which showed a winding queue of Syrian refugees in Slovenia in 2015. As Jonathan Jones explains: ‘This tide of faces summons up exactly the same swarms and rivers and hordes of otherness and racial difference that Powell spoke against in 1968 and that so many have tried to evoke since.’ Campaigners similarly reiterated Powell’s argument about the impact of immigration on the existing population, with the Conservative MP Priti Patel, for instance, claiming that ‘the shortage of primary school places is yet another example of how uncontrolled migration is putting unsustainable pressures on our public services’.19 This epideictic rhetoric of division and blame was widely condemned but, with rising anti-immigrant sentiment and the uncertainties surrounding Britain’s departure from the EU, it is likely to feature in the public discourse on ‘race’ and immigration for some time to come.


3 All direct quotations from the speech itself are taken from E. Powell, ‘Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech, Telegraph, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html, 6 November 2007


11 Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric*, p.120

12 Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric*, p.131. For further discussion of Powell’s English nationalism, see McLean, *Rational Choice & British Politics*, pp.143-44

14 Condit, ‘The Functions of Epideictic’ p.289

15 Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse*, p.123

16 J. Atkins and A. Finlayson, “…A 40-year-old black man made the point to me”: Anecdotes, everyday knowledge and the performance of leadership in British politics’, *Political Studies*, 61/1 (2013) p.165

17 Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric* p.122

18 Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric*, p.122