

# COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL ORDER

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*With a New Introduction by  
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*Introduction to the Transaction Edition*  
*Carol Wilder*

How is social experience organized? How is social order expressed? In what ways do human motives become known? Can symbolic interaction be studied as a social fact? How can we come to understand the relationship between art and society, and its further relation to varieties of social order and disorder? And, centrally, how can we think at all about societal events unless we use forms of thought of how humans *communicate* as they act together in society?

The answers, argues Hugh Duncan in this classic work, lie in exploring the belief that "human communication in society is an attempt to create symbols whose use is believed to uphold social order." Moreover, it is not in attention to the content of symbols that a theory of communication and social action is to be found, but rather in symbolic forms, relationships, interactions. What are these symbolic forms? How can they be identified? How do they work, how do they operate, to create and sustain social order?

*Communication and Social Order* is Duncan's pathfinding attempt to clear the way for a theory of symbols in society, a theory which treats communication not as an epiphenomenon to be reckoned with only in passing, but as an activity which lies at the very heart of social experience. Kenneth Boulding, reviewing the first publication of this work for *Scientific American*, finds Duncan's central idea to be that "the dynamics of society cannot be understood without an understanding of the process of communication, by which the great artist changes the taste of millions, the dramatist arouses images that deflect the course of history and the orator stirs men to glory or to madness."<sup>1</sup>

Such a notion may not strike us as remarkable in the 1980s, when communicational models (e.g. loosely, Mead, Bateson, Kelly, Blumer, Watzlawick, Geertz, Goffman, Burke, Sullivan) have indisputably taken their place—albeit second place—in the social and behavioral sciences. Recall, however, that Duncan was writing *Communication and Social Order* more than two decades ago, at a time close to the height of fashion for mechanistic, quantifiable social theorizing and research. Duncan begins his argument virtually at square one because he is specifically challenging the formidable foe of Parsonian functionalism, a theory which relegates language to the status of a "mechanism" for

the transmission of culture, a mechanism sharing a role similar to that of money in Parsons's view.

Given the advantage we now have of hindsight over Duncan's full range of work, it becomes clear that *Communication and Social Order* serves in large measure as an extensive prologue to his systematic theoretical statement presented in *Symbols in Society*, written six years later. *Communication and Social Order* has all the hallmarks of a pioneering journey; here and there it falters or bewilders, here and there again we share a moment of inspired discovery. As such, this is not an easy book to travel through, not comfortable to travel with. Some of its byways turn out to be blind alleys and some of its treasure is hidden; Duncan leaves it to the reader to map the true course of his search for a theory of symbolic action which will unify our understanding of the creation and maintenance of social order.

Perhaps a brief look "ahead" to Duncan's system as articulated in *Symbols in Society* will reflect some light back upon the less orderly volume at hand. If *Communication and Social Order* can best be seen as an intellectual journey, *Symbols in Society* is surely Duncan's fullest account of the destination. This later work is structured around seventy-one propositions, twelve of which Duncan terms "axiomatic," with the remainder divided between "theoretical" and "methodological" propositions. It is the axiomatic propositions which are of most interest here, for these dozen statements taken together represent the credo Duncan courts without consummation in *Communication and Social Order*. Before turning to look directly at the present work, the axiomatic propositions of *Symbols in Society* merit repetition:

1. Society arises in, and continues to exist through, the communication of significant symbols.
2. Man creates the significant symbols he uses in communication.
3. Emotions, as well as thought and will, are learned in communication.
4. Symbols affect social motives by determining the forms in which the contents of relationships can be expressed.
5. From a sociological view motives must be understood as man's need for social relationships.
6. Symbols are directly observable data of meaning in social relationships.
7. Social order is expressed through hierarchies which differentiate men into ranks, classes, and status groups, and, at the same time, resolve differentiation through appeals to principles of order which transcend those upon which differentiation is based.

8. Hierarchy is expressed through the symbolization of superiority, inferiority, and equality, and of passage from one to the other.
9. Hierarchy functions through persuasion, which takes the form of courtship in social relationships.
10. The expression of hierarchy is best conceived through forms of drama which are both comic and tragic.
11. Social order is created and sustained in social dramas through intensive and frequent communal presentations of tragic and comic roles whose proper enactment is believed necessary to community survival.
12. Social order is always a resolution of acceptance, doubt, or rejection of the principles that are believed to guarantee such order.<sup>2</sup>

Note the key terms here: society, symbols, communication, motive, form, order, hierarchy, drama. Expressed discursively, society exists in and through the communication of symbolic forms, forms which determine the ways in which social motives can be expressed. Social order is inescapably hierarchical, and most suitably analyzed through a dramatic representation. This is the case argued in the present volume.

Duncan is scrupulous in his payment of intellectual debts. Nearly all his final work, *Symbols and Social Theory*,<sup>3</sup> is devoted to this task, as is the first third of *Communication and Social Order*. Here Duncan summarizes the contributions to a theory of symbolic interaction made by Freud, Simmel, Malinowski, James, Dewey, Mead, and Burke. However labored the reader may find these excursions (Boulding writes that "it is as if the author were working a little too hard to establish his reference group"), Duncan's main points are worthy of mention here for the insight they provide into his subsequent formulations.

Sigmund Freud may seem a peculiar point of departure for the development of a theory of symbolic interaction, yet this is where Duncan begins. Freud's monadic, intrapsychic psychoanalytic theory is hardly helpful in understanding forms of relationships: Freud is the *bête noire* of contemporary family ("interactional") therapy. Family systems therapists and theorists (e.g. Gregory Bateson) most often present Freud and his interest in processes *within* people as a counterpoint to their concern with processes *between* people. Yet this distinction is not entirely lost on Duncan, who recognizes the limitations of Freud's emphasis on communication as cathexis and sees that "the basic problem for human scientists interested in social communication of how to explain emotion, not as motion but as communication, is not solved by Freud."

Duncan uses Freud, rather, because of the importance of symbols in his work. Freud may not be interactional, but he is surely symbolic. And while Freud may have "refused to study motivation in terms of symbols, he often illustrated what he had studied and conclusions he had reached, through illustrations drawn from symbolic works." Duncan draws a distinction between Freud's theorizing and his exemplifications: "It is not so much Freud's theory of repression, but his remarks on the expression of the repression, which are significant to those seeking to develop a theory of social action based on communication." Duncan is especially taken with Freud's treatment of jokes, dreams, and the unconscious elements in communication, pointing to the fact that many illustrations of condensations and displacement reveal the involvement of social as well as sexual elements. Duncan also externalizes Freud's dream censor to become the conscious audience of address. Duncan is taken with Freud's symbolic descriptions "as a *source* for the development of a specific sociological approach, but a source is only a beginning."

Were Duncan to have examined the work of Georg Simmel a decade after writing *Communication and Social Order*, he likely would have attended more closely to Simmel's theorizing about social conflict, a major concern of Simmel's which receives little notice here. Later, at least by 1970, Duncan could state clearly that "a model of rhetoric as used in a democratic society must be a conflict rhetoric."<sup>4</sup> Herein, however, Duncan invokes Simmel to exploit the potential of a focus on social *forms*. Simmel's search for a "pure form of sociation" led him to consider the varieties of human play, where form achieves autonomy from material causes and can thus be studied in its purest sense: In conversation we talk for the sake of talking, at parties we socialize for the sake of socializing, we flirt for the sake of flirting. It is no accident, suggests Duncan, that we place so much emphasis on "good form" in social relationships. Sociability is the "primary sociological category": It has no objective purpose, no content, and no extrinsic results. Tact, manners, discretion, and the like are forms which constitute primary data for the drama of social relationships. Play is to reality as art is to reality, for both activities can be represented as pure form. Content is important ("the subject of talk must be interesting and fascinating"), but in all cases is subordinated to form, in this instance meaning the rules which govern social discourse.

Yet in the end, Simmel falls short of developing a theory of symbolic interaction. Art and play are used by Simmel to illustrate rather than to constitute his social theory, a theory at its roots mechanical rather than

symbolic. Simmel "reduces social process to a natural process." Just as Duncan found Freud's focus on symbols useful despite the limitations of psychoanalytic theory, he finds Simmel's attention to form of value even though it stops short of a full symbolic theory.

Malinowski comes closer to presenting a social theory of communication by making language an organizing principle of society. Language is a "mode of action," and no meaning can be ascertained apart from an understanding of the "context of situation." Utterance carries no intrinsic significance. Meaning is not contained *within* symbols; it is to be found in the *relationship* of symbols to social context. Purely social talk, where the talk itself becomes self-referentially the context, Malinowski calls "phatic communication." And beyond pragmatic language and social talk lies Malinowski's special interest, the language of magic. The magical act, with its distinctive form and context and rhetorical function, provides a rich source of data for the analysis of communication processes. In the end, however, Malinowski's strict attention to magical communication—an essentially authoritarian mode—limits the range of his contribution by neglecting the dialectical and rhetorical functions of language so central to democratic social organization. Also, in Duncan's view, Malinowski disregards art, form, and the relationship between language and social change, further restricting his contribution.

James, Dewey, and Mead turned social philosophy around by arguing that the way in which people express themselves about their experience *is* their experience. While there may well exist some form of experience behind the "veil of words," all we can observe—hence all that can constitute a science of society—is what people *say*. James viewed religion from this perspective: Religious experience exists in its expression, regardless of what sorts of "laws" may be said to be operating behind the scenes.

But what forms does this data of expression assume which best allow of symbolic analysis? Duncan decisively chooses art here, a form of expression "unique among the acts of men because it is both instrumental and consummatory." Duncan singles out John Dewey because of the centrality of art to his theory of social action. Art integrates consummatory and instrumental aspects of events, giving the meaning to experience which is essential to social communication. The artist, through creating "forms which make possible participating in community life," thus creates also social interaction. The study of art replaces the study of the supernatural in Dewey's scheme; perhaps art is the most refined form of observable human expression. Duncan faults Dewey for not

providing a functional model of art in society, for telling *what* communication as art in society does but not *how* this is accomplished.

Far more functional is the work of George Herbert Mead, who addressed interaction between self and society as a primary concern. Interpersonal reality is a socially bestowed phenomenon. To become conscious of self one must learn to take the attitude of others, to stand as an object to oneself. The complicated games and role plays through which self is created and maintained can be represented by a dramatic model: "The basic *form* of communication as a social act, whatever its content, is histrionic."

Duncan acknowledges Mead's great importance and sketches these roots of symbolic interactionism in some detail, but in the end finds Mead to be excessively optimistic and theoretically inconsistent. Despite Mead's extensive considerations of the relationship of art to communication, "he never really tells us how art arises in, and continues to exist in, communication in society, and what likenesses and differences exist between art and the social as categories of experience."

One wonders—What thinker can satisfy Duncan? Who comes closest to the mark by embracing the notions we by now know are crucial for him: symbol, form, context, art, interaction? For his conceptual mentor, Duncan joins a handful of other sociologists (Erving Goffman, Clifford Geertz, Joseph Gusfield) in choosing master symbolist Kenneth Burke. Duncan's dual interest in literary criticism and social theory made Burke a natural choice, for despite the literary apparel of Burke's prose he is at root a social philosopher, interested in "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."

Burke considers human behavior in terms of drama; these terms begin in theories of action rather than theories of knowledge. Society is a dramatic process in which hierarchy forms structure through power relationships. When hierarchy has a definite organization it is "bureaucratized" and then there is order in society. It is this bureaucratization of hierarchy resulting in order which makes hierarchy the structure of society. Hierarchy embodies authority, upon which three attitudes may be brought to bear: acceptance, rejection, or doubt. Acceptance begets satisfaction and order; rejection begets alienation and disorder. Language allows rejection because of its "peculiar possibility of the negative." Guilt results when hierarchy is rejected; guilt is inherent in society—class conflict is inherent in hierarchy. Guilt compels purification through either mortification (self-sacrifice) or victimization (scapegoating), both of which lead to redemption.

If the function of an act can be explained in terms of hierarchy, guilt, victimization, and redemption, its structure can be discussed in terms of Burke's "dramatistic pentad": Terms of the pentad are act (what was done), scene (when or where it was done), agent (who did it), agency (how it was done), and purpose (why it was done). The pentad is both divided and unified, analogous to the hand, and all components are interrelated in some ratio. For instance, scene and agent reciprocally relate such that social context shapes the behavior of actors who in return determine the scene. Or again, act and purpose manifest their relationship when "the end of action and action itself are congruent," as in the Indochinese war policy of destroying a village in order to save it.

Duncan's debt to Burke is one of both style and substance. Those who object to the religiosity of Burke's language will find little reprieve in Duncan, who likewise adopts something of a transcendent vocabulary. Duncan also resembles Burke in his sometimes maddening pursuit of every turn an idea may take, a dizzying habit of mind to the reader in search of the "point." Nothing comes easy from either of these hybrid thinkers, and the audience is not exempted from sharing the labor of discovery. Duncan and Burke both write as if to omit the slightest implication may squander a diamond in the rough. The density and richness of this sort of writing may account in no small measure for the slight that social and communication theorists have handed both thinkers, despite the fact that as early as 1935 Louis Wirth (Duncan's Ph.D. adviser) introduced Burke to the sociological community via a highly praiseworthy review of *Permanence and Change* for the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Alas, here we are nearly half a century later gathered to witness the resurrection of a work in the Burkean tradition which has received far less than its due. And having said quite enough about most of Duncan's forbears, it remains to explore the story of *Communication and Social Order* as it unfolds both in and between the lines.

*Communication and Social Order* was more than a decade in the making; Duncan wrote at least five full drafts of the work beginning in the early 1950s, substantially shifting the conceptual center over the years. The seed of the work was no doubt planted even earlier, perhaps as early as 1938 when Duncan fell under the spell of Kenneth Burke, who led him in a Psychology of Poetic Form seminar at the University of Chicago, a fateful day: It was at this time that Duncan initiated what was to become a lifelong correspondence with Burke, much of which pertains to Duncan's long struggle to articulate the position he comes to take in *Communication and Social Order*. The position, as I understand it,



comes to this: Social order is inescapably hierarchical, presuming the existence of superiors, inferiors, and equals. Hierarchy begets classes, and the differences between classes allow a form of miscommunication—mystification—which it is the function of the social order to maintain. Yet there seems to be a basic human instinct toward community, synthesis, and equality. And while it is the office of most social forms (as diverse as government bureaucracy and conversational rules for politeness) to uphold the status quo, selected forms such as play and humor provide opportunities for safely challenging the prevailing order. Both play and humor function within frames which metacommunicate the message “don’t take this seriously,” thus much of the most serious hierarchy-goading information can be communicated while simultaneously being denied. This activity can take the guise of an editorial cartoon, a political satirist, or witticisms about the “boss” traded over a beer, but in any case the effect is a demystification—however passing—of class difference.

When Duncan hits his stride in the present volume—about halfway through—it becomes evident that he has embraced hierarchy as his central image and comic art as his key exemplification, emphases which took years to mature. To understand this process with a view toward fuller appreciation of Duncan’s work, a look at extant papers from the decade-long development of *Communication and Social Order* is revealing.

At least three full outlines from various writing stages of *Communication and Social Order* survive, offering special insight into a major thinker at work. Taken together, these outlines (from 1954, 1956, and 1960) display clearly that Duncan labored mightily to find a key image or theme which would ground and unify the work. Three major themes of the book which underwent major transformations during its development were art, comedy, and hierarchy.

As early as 1951 Duncan wrote to Kenneth Burke that “obviously, my own work is a search for some kind of statement of society in terms of communication.”<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this same letter also includes the first of Duncan’s many exhortations to Burke to write on the subject of comedy, advice Duncan somewhat later took to heart for himself by making comedy his case study of communication and social order. But in 1951, Duncan was trying to parcel the topic out. He wrote to Burke:

I wish you would turn over in your mind a statement about comedy. It might actually be a purge for our times. And it might take a little of the sanctimonious air away from the way we are all beginning to talk about talk. Mencken, the merry semanticist, is the only one I know who depicts the verbal scramble as a scuffle in a world populated by W.C. Fields and his

phonies, or maybe we should begin laughing at some others. At any rate the comic muse should be invited to leave the boys in the back room for a while. But again maybe she is in safer hands there. . .<sup>6</sup>

This closing ambivalence may provide a clue as to why Duncan was so long in coming to a treatment of comedy himself, while at the same time his frequent urgings to Burke to join the fray suggest the abiding value he placed on serious treatment of the subject.

By 1952, the theme of hierarchy was becoming salient in Duncan's thinking, as it had been all along for Burke. While struggling with an early draft of *Communication and Social Order*, Duncan wrote to Burke that "you are the only one I know who keeps to the central problem: how status arises in and through communication."<sup>7</sup> Moving into the thick of contemplation on the subject, Duncan queries:

How are we to keep a pious attitude toward criticism of hierarchy? Weber suggests (and Parsons paraphrases this) criticism is a means-end relationship as the end of reason (over social relationships). Granted, but how do we create and sustain the necessary pieties toward reason. . . . I suppose all you can say is that whatever is conscious, that is whatever is "open to reason," in conditions where reason is a value, will be safe. Yet as Mannheim stresses we must be careful to note who "owns" reason. As you point out, reason is not without its own magic, as in the scientific labs, the professor's office, etc., where there is great authority and the most rigid hierarchy I have known. Even the army was very flexible about transfers from one unit, branch, etc., to another, but the learned professions assume that each professor is making a unique contribution to knowledge, at the same time they assume that the professor alone is competent to judge what others are accomplishing as contributions to knowledge. Here again the only way out of this impasse is open criticism. Suggestion: All theses be passed by boards of critics drawn from various fields and approved at annual conventions of learned bodies. Wow!<sup>8</sup>

The personal turn and urgent tone of Duncan's musings on hierarchy here make it come as no surprise when he later places the notion centrally. The vision of society here is an open one, one in which all formal institutions are vulnerable to criticism, one in which it is a right if not a duty to "question authority."

Another feature of this especially impressive letter merits note, for here is the first time in Duncan's correspondence with Burke that he links his three major themes of art, comedy, and hierarchy:

On the whole I think that art is the best corrective [for hierarchy]. The more I think about our great clowns and the richness of American laughter the more I am convinced that an open society can remain fairly healthy as long as it subsidizes laughter. Perhaps there is nothing more profound about reason than laughter. At least in the reduction of psychoses attendant to hierarchy laughter is, to use a hierarchical term, the sovereign remedy. I know that it is necessary at times to have tragedy. The *Passions* of Bach are to me the great

counterpart of the Greek tragedy (the role of the congregation, the great choruses, etc.). But I think the Christian tradition was so rooted in the notion that the world, when all was said and done, must be written off and we must prepare ourselves here for the next, that it becomes highly unusable as a secular ethic. Confucius, Rabelais, Montaigne, Erasmus, and on a more popular level now, Chaplin, W.C. Fields, Krazy Kat, and the terrible irony of Kafka where he chides himself for trying to make sense out of a hierarchy essentially senseless, strike me as very useful.<sup>9</sup>

The representations evoked by art are the safeguards of equality, hence of democracy, and in Duncan's view it is the art of laughter, not of tears, which opens the true path through the hierarchical maze he takes as given.

Duncan's 1954 outline of *Communication and Social Order*—then titled *Art and Social Hierarchy*—shows relatively scant evidence of this art-comedy-hierarchy relationship when compared to the final manuscript. More than half of the fifty chapter heads and subheads of this outline include the word *art*, but *hierarchy* is mentioned only six times (in subheads) and *comedy* is not mentioned at all. Mead, Burke, and Freud are included here, but receive nowhere close to the attention they are given in the final version. The two points here which become most important in *Communication and Social Order*—"mysteries of hierarchy opened to reason through art" and "communication of hierarchy as basic sociological function of art"—are both relegated to minor status in this early outline. At this stage it appears that Duncan is using art as a lens through which to view communication, a position later radically transformed when communication—symbolic interaction—becomes the lens itself.

By 1956 Duncan's focus had changed dramatically. In June of that year he wrote to Burke, by now a monthly correspondent, reporting:

I am deep in hierarchy. All sorts of models of hierarchic action flit through my head. Once you have a scheme it is amazing how it can be turned and looked at in various ways. The trouble is, what does it have to do with experience?<sup>10</sup>

Burke had earlier given Duncan a bit of advice on the question of hierarchy:

Incidentally, as regards the hierarchy bizz, might it add up to this: The old-time reactionaries and conservatives affirmed the great desirability of hierarchy: progressives, liberals, revolutionaries, nihilists, etc., affirmed its evil and variously promised its abolishment; dramatism would simply study it neutrally, as a major "fact."<sup>11</sup>

It is evident that Duncan is closer to finding his center when he can ask:

How can we open the mystifications and the linkages of hierarchy to some kind of method like the Socratic? The only hope I see is comedy, sports, and play, where in the guise of fun we can think about what we must be very solemn about in other phases of action.<sup>12</sup>

An outline of *Communication and Social Process* written in approximately 1956 reflects Duncan's shifting emphasis. "Art" is now dropped from the working title, which reads *Social Hierarchy: A Sociological Essay on the Expression of Social Hierarchy in Symbolic Phases of Communication*. "Hierarchy," rather than gaining mention in one-tenth of the chapter headings as in 1964, now appears in nearly half of them. Conversely, "art," which held a similar high position in the earlier outline, now shows in but one-seventh of the headings. And comedy at last appears, albeit one time only. Duncan is closing in on his goal.

Kenneth Burke played a major role in the development of *Communication and Social Order*, both indirectly as theoretical (one is almost tempted to say "spiritual") mentor and directly as an exceptionally thorough manuscript reviewer. In 1955, Burke wrote:

Started your manuscript some time back, and found it convincing but perhaps a bit too ranging. However, that reservation will certainly be modified if you subsequently come to rest on the building of some asseveration, without giving a poop about any of us. You are too considerate, sir.<sup>13</sup>

While Duncan never seemed to overcome the excessive consideration of his forbears as writ large in his exhaustive presentations of their key ideas, he did, at this point, come to rest on the asseveration that social reality is a *symbolic* construction whose form is hierarchical, whose process is dialectical, and whose most telling expression is to be found in comic art.

Burke's most extensive critique of *Communication and Social Order* survives in the form of a twelve-thousand-plus-word letter written in 1955.<sup>14</sup> While generally supportive, Burke (with characteristic thoroughness) comments on everything from the broadest focus of the work to incidences of awkward sentence structure. Several samples of middle-level criticism should suffice in communicating the flavor of Burke's approach:

Incidentally, another notion is beginning to occur to me. Might the best architecture of a period be towards serenity, or some such, precisely when the best drama is toward bellyache? As per the poet who loves to get himself comfortably settled by the fire and weep bitterly for all mankind.

Maybe our difference (if there is one!) is this: I would approach art in terms of symbol-using. You would approach it in terms of communication. The two greatly overlap, but they

are not identical. One may carry out the possibilities of a symbol-system to the point where they interfere with communication, whereas less far-ranging uses of a symbol-system may communicate almost wholly [p. 39].

And:

Here you do use "language" rather than "communication" as your test. My point, then, is that, although language is perfected by communication, one can focus upon its resources without concern with communication and even to the endangering of communication [p. 139].

And gently chiding:

In what Cooley, Mead, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and now Burke call a *dramatic form*. Irony indeed. I made up that word as a deliberate trade name of my particular wares. But lo it has thus disparaged, it has flooded the coop of my possession, somewhat as when the trade name "frigidaire" came to apply not just to one company's product but to the similar products of all rival operators, too. But your comment here is the unkindest cut of all. This haint just sociology, bejeez, it's socialization! [p. 317].

And even:

... on drunkenness as reducing social differentiation. You might add: "except when it works exactly the opposite way! The trouble with alky friendliness is that it is so often on the verge of ending in a brawl [p. 402].

Burke emphasizes in this review, as he does elsewhere in a brief review for the University of Chicago Press, that "the stuff on comedy and hierarchy is by far the best part of it," an opinion with which most readers of the final product would concur.

It is likewise easy to understand Burke's assessment that "the two main faults in the other sections are surveyitis and scolding [of colleagues]." For someone who worked largely in isolation, Duncan displays extraordinary attentiveness toward other thinkers, a tendency which sometimes obscures his original contributions because of the sheer manuscript space he delegates to friends and foes. Burke urges him to cut, cut, cut:

I think if you could bring yourself to slash into the material in such fashion, you'd have a very effective book. You could leave it as it is and still have something that would pass. But it would be a crime to have put so much work into a book and then to skimp on the week or two still needed to make it a book instead of a sociology clip-sheet. But you could do this work only by the rules I have suggested [e.g. "read the manuscript from beginning to end without a break"]. You'd have to work on it in a situation that allowed for nearly absolute Retreat. For the book as it now stands is too scattered. Let Your Business Rot for One Week.

Abandon Your Love Life for One Week. Just Glumly Revise, being Brutally Willing to Sacrifice.

And you'll have a strong book.

In its present form, it passes, but is not strong.

Naturally, I'd like to see the wavering dialectic cleared up, too. But I consider the cuts more important than the revision. "When in doubt, cut it out."

Readers of this volume may question just how seriously Duncan was able to take Burke's advice, but if *Communication and Social Order* still suffers a bit from "surveyitis," it is not from lack of trying on Duncan's part. Of his six published books, this one is generally considered the most important, and it was certainly his most consuming. None of his other works receives more than passing attention in the Burke-Duncan letters, and while *Communication and Social Order* took well over a decade to come to fruition, four of Duncan's five other books were published in rapid succession during the following seven years: *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center* in 1964; *Culture and Democracy* in 1965; *Symbols in Society* in 1968; and *Symbols and Social Theory* in 1969. (*Language and Literature in Society* was published in 1953.) But in 1955, Duncan was

still wrasin' with the problem of structure in my ms. I have enough stuff on comedy and hierarchy to take a stall in the shop you once told me about. I'll label mine Duncan's Patented Hierarchic Cathartic and sell it along with your Symbolic Catharsis. When business falls off we'll do a one cent sale. Attach my nostrum to your package and we're in business.

Sales Problem for the next meeting. . . . who wants to be cured of a hierarchic malady. Awful thought for a man of enterprise. That's the trouble with listening to these long hairs.<sup>15</sup>

"Sales problem" indeed. Duncan may have had a hard time writing *Communication and Social Order*, but he had an even harder time getting it published. In 1956 he wrote to Burke:

Since I last submitted my ms. to the [University of Chicago] Press a new managing editor has been appointed. In my presence he thumbed through my ms. and began a series of negative remarks about it. This whole attitude has been continued. I am sure he has not read it (he never had a chance to until this interview when I took the revised draft for him to see), so there must be policy reasons for his remarks. I just don't get it. The whole thing has become so painful I have written him asking him to send it back to me, for even if he accepted it now I would not have much confidence in any talk with him about changes, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Duncan's publishing tribulations can be understood in part because of his maverick position vis-à-vis both of his "disciplines" of literary art and sociology and in part through the frankly acknowledged fact that writing—to which he was deeply committed—did not come easily to him.

Much of Duncan's early correspondence to Burke includes mention of this problem. In 1952 Duncan writes that he was scolded by Hayden Carruth—then managing editor of the University of Chicago Press—about “my bad expression, although he seems to have a high value for my ideas. This is a common criticism of my work.”<sup>17</sup> Shortly thereafter he elaborates:

I know I need to write better. The problem is how to write so that you evoke as well as analyze, or is this simply another way of meeting the old problem of the relationship between idea and image? Certainly academic lingo is full of ideas, literary of wonderful images. Good scholarly prose would be which? Or, if combined, how? It beats me.<sup>18</sup>

Duncan recognized that part of the difficulty was some “puzzlement about whom I address when I write. There seems to be some ideal audience that you must stick to—the problem in my stage is to create one—or does one *find* them?”<sup>19</sup> There *was* no ready-made audience for Duncan's scholarship in this era when communicational and symbolic approaches to both the social sciences and literature were fledging and largely fell upon deaf ears. Taking communication as *the* data of sociation rather than as a means to discover the “real” phenomena of, say, “psychosis,” “social equilibrium,” or “class mobility” requires such a step-function adjustment that the one-eyed man in the land of the blind faces a formidable pedagogical challenge. Like M. Jourdain, Molière's bourgeois gentleman, Duncan made much of his realization that he “speak prose,” and as a consequence faced much of the same reception.

All creative thinkers struggle with the constraints of symbol systems, and Duncan was no exception. “The more you try to write about ideas,” he averred, “the more you approach the way poets handle words as your ideal. I am trying to really write. This is very different from reporting some ideas.”<sup>20</sup> So it is, especially to one who recognizes the critical role of form in the full expression of thought. Ironically this very thoroughness may have compromised in some measure his ability to write provocatively. For the most part, Duncan writes in the format of what Umberto Eco has called a “closed text,” which gives the reader little room to wonder what it is all about. An open text does not satisfy the reader's “hunger for redundancy,” an appetite rather well sated by Duncan.

There is a poignancy every writer will find familiar in Duncan's disclosure of self-doubt while writing his book on Chicago literature:

Minna [Mrs. Duncan] tells me that I am very irritable. I tell her that this book is important, that the future of America hangs on my interpretation of Chicago. Then I think, if it doesn't

it should, because it is about time somebody said something about us out here. And then I get scared about whether I really have the stuff. Then there are other days when I can't seem to believe in what I am doing. These are the worst. Then sweep in other days when heart and head reach over to each other and a moment of glory comes. These are the great moments—but how fleeting. The trouble with writing is that you cannot be ironic about your own work. Irony seems to be one of those fatal contradictions. Perhaps if, like the great aristocrat, you have a great enough audience, it is satisfying. Then I suppose, you could even die in the grand manner.<sup>21</sup>

Despite such periods of doubt, Duncan carried on writing, and must be called prolific by any standards. *Communication and Social Order* was produced somewhat in fits and starts and there were long periods when the manuscript was set aside as Duncan turned to either one of his other books in progress or to a series of real estate ventures which were to make him financially independent. But in 1957 he was back to the project closest in his heart, trying to incorporate the revisions recommended by Burke several years earlier:

I have been reading my Hierarchy ms. once again. I want to spare you too close attention to Part I. It is an awful mess now. Why I did not realize this before I cannot understand. I think it was because I was so busy paying off some kind of score against the profession for not making me a full professor at Harvard. I do not need to feel that way anymore, so all the rambling pages from 1 through 113 can be cut down.<sup>22</sup>

Here Duncan lets it be known that he is revising in response to Burke's complaints about "surveyitis" and "scolding," during a period which ranged from the late 1940s to the early 1960s when he was not formally employed as an academic. (He held a permanent professorial post—at Southern Illinois University—only during the last decade of his life.)

Eventually, *Communication and Social Order* was accepted for publication by Bedminster Press, and the final product bears Burke's influence at every turn. It is virtually impossible to overestimate Duncan's debt to Burke, whom Charles Elkins claims was Duncan's "friend, his critic, his confidant, his father-figure—one of the few with whom Duncan could share his hopes and fears."<sup>23</sup> This is well documented in the Burke-Duncan letters, wherein Duncan continually expresses his admiration and respect, aptly summarized in his imagined dedication to Burke's autobiography in progress: "To Kenneth Burke whose long voyage into the night has brought us nearer to the shores of light."<sup>24</sup>

One theme that pervades Duncan's letters of the 1940s is his astonishment that Burke has not yet received his just due from academicians:



What amuses me about . . . academicians I have talked to about your work is that they insist it is of great importance but they really don't know why because it doesn't fit into any of the bins. So, I have decided to circumvent them by creating a Burkian Bin, called "The Nature of Communication as Evidenced by the Symbolic Act." My strategy is to insist that you are wholly involved in the matter of method, of *how* we can analyze discourse.<sup>25</sup>

This was a bold statement to make during an era when neither Burke's nor Duncan's work was even considered to be "research," let alone *methodological* research. Part of the difficulty, Duncan writes to Burke, may arise from the fact that

your method of writing is based on extension and the small minds will want intension. They want you to do a set piece so that they can use it for practical purposes such as teaching, etc. Instead you like to extend your range of observations throughout as many fields as possible. This allows you to test your ideas against those of creative minds in place of submitting your ideas to the test of merely orderly minds.<sup>26</sup>

This, then, is why:

No specialist can like your work for you are the bull in the world of bins. When you proportionalize what they are essentializing, they simply cannot follow you. That is why I told you that you have a theory of society in your work.<sup>27</sup>

Duncan's view of Burke as a social philosopher is now so widely accepted that it is difficult to appreciate the astuteness of his claim made more than thirty years ago.

Some of Duncan's most engaging prose expresses his utter enchantment with Burke's work. In 1949 he wrote:

A note, struck off in a moment of Burkian euphoria, after delving again into your works, specifically regarding your social act construct (Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose). Having piled up some 200 pages in my ms. in which I am trying to say something about communicative acts [most likely the seed of *Communication and Social Order*], I admire your pentad more and more. I hope my admiration will become the sincerest form of thanks: a good book.<sup>28</sup>

Along the same lines, Duncan wrote shortly thereafter:

I am so damn glad you are to be out here because I am at the point in my work where I am beginning to personalize The Act. Some days I cozy up with Scene and find Tradition, Memory, Commemoration, etc., everywhere. Other days Purpose lures me into Utopias, Futures, Teleology, Heavens, Ideals, Models.<sup>29</sup>

Duncan found in Burke the sort of provocative writing that he himself

chy"; because "as we laugh together, loneliness and alienation vanish"; because "comedy teaches us that men can endure much if they can endure it in rational discourse with each other." Comedy relieves social tension and serves as a resistance against authority. Comedy strengthens social bonds; thus "all comedy is highly moral." Unlike tragedy, which prepares the victim for sacrifice, comedy prepares him for *dialogue*. "Comedy is ethical because it is rational and rational because it leads to good social relationships." Comedy offers a way of challenging those social hierarchies which are vulnerable to change and enduring those which are not. "Laughter may not be enough to save us," wrote Duncan, "but unless we live under reason and love, what is the use of living at all?"

In a 1963 autobiographical piece, Duncan explained:

The drama of society is for me a comic, not a tragic drama. This is not because I find life a great joke, nor because I think tragedy a great illusion, but because comedy keeps reason alive, demands equality in social relationships, and permits us to re-examine our social relationships so we can change them. It is, in short, for me the typical democratic relationship, and the typical modern expression of art. Perhaps, when all is said and done, I prefer comedy because it seems far more benign than tragedy, and as befits a scholar who grew up in the land of Mark Twain and Lincoln, laughing gods of art and society, comedy seems far more trustworthy in the mundane affairs of life . . . at least in the Middle West, for we are at our best out here when we laugh at each other.<sup>33</sup>

Duncan, the taciturn Scot, finds many of his truest moments as a theorist concerned with the language of laughter, a language which comes closest to allowing the social equality he so passionately championed.

In all, Duncan's vision is profoundly democratic. Kenneth Boulding, in the review cited earlier, reckoned that "Duncan's discussion of the nature of social equality impresses me as being the most profound body of insight into this subject I have ever read." How did this theme of democracy come to pervade Duncan's work? Perhaps, as Charles Elkins has suggested, it had something to do with Duncan's service during World War II as an intelligence officer. It may reflect the subtle effect of the Cold War upon his consciousness. Duncan himself wrote that the period during the late 1930s when he lived and worked at Chicago's famed Hull House "heightened my awareness of social injustice, and forced me to search more deeply into the meaning of art."<sup>34</sup> In any case, democratic egalitarianism is clearly Duncan's ideal social order. "It is only among equals that we find conversation and discussion," he wrote. Only under "the conditions of equality can the self be born." But there is a paradox here, for the natural form of social organization is

strove to achieve. And the years did little to diminish his reverence for the master. In 1954 Duncan wrote:

I cannot tell you how wonderful I think your working out of the various aspects of symbolic expression are. I work in your shadow at every turn, a luminous shadow for me. When I get through with a chunk of work I always feel guilty about how much better you have said what I try to say! That is why I call you a shadow, I guess. The trouble is that I really do not want to get out from it because only when under it does my mind leap about in the most amazing fashion. Freud trails off into the Unconscious, the libido, the Id, but you soar into the light, the conscious, the community of communicants who like the Thelemites are content to be human even though aware of the risks.<sup>30</sup>

Duncan frequently expressed this concern that he was laboring too fully in Burke's shadow, making many tongue-in-cheek references to his "plagiarism." For instance, in 1949 he wrote:

I haven't written to you or about you because I am so busy stealing your ideas in a book I am now writing that it seems almost superfluous to write you as you exist in Andover. With your help, as well as Dilthey, Weber, Lukacz, Collingwood, Dewey, Veblen, Malinowski, Frazer, etc., I hope to get out an extended essay on the nature, function, structure, and relation to power of the *aesthetic act* in American society.

During dry spells I think—what the hell, Burke and Dewey have done this anyway. Why should I simply repeat what good men have done! But then I return to my cheerful thievery. The best I can say as I whistle while I work is well—Burke said this so well that it is even fun to say it again.<sup>31</sup>

Duncan even explains his intermittent correspondence in a 1955 letter accompanying a draft of *Communication and Social Order* by writing: "I think when you look through my ms. you will see why it is I write so seldom. Thus far my work has been so much of a dialogue with you that letters seem superfluous."<sup>32</sup>

Duncan is too modest, for despite Burke's inescapable mark, *Communication and Social Order* emerges from his shadow in at least one very significant way through Duncan's emphasis on the social functions of *comedy*. In contrast to Burke's focus on ritual and tragedy, Duncan calls comedy nothing less than the "rhetoric of reason in society," and his treatment of it is the most original contribution of this work. What makes this so fascinating is knowing how late Duncan came to the subject after his years of urging Burke to take it up. It appears that Duncan took the topic as his own only after Burke had parceled it out to him as a conference paper topic in 1956.

Why comedy? Because laughter "clarifies" where tragedy "mystifies"; because "comedy opens to reason the mystifications of social hierar-

hierarchy, and hierarchy is comprised of relationships among superiors, inferiors, and equals. Conversation can take place only among equals, yet social systems are maintained by a balance of inequality. This is the fundamental dilemma which we strive to overcome through humor, art, and social play where "the purest form of relationship among equals exists."

The struggle is never easy, especially given the fragile gift of communication through which the battle must be waged. The alternative is the dark world sought by a master manipulator like Hitler, whose "rhetoric of hell" moves Duncan to some of his most fervent prose in this book. Hitler—"the greatest rhetorician of evil known to history"—well understood that the purpose of rhetoric is "to satisfy the longing of people for communion with each other." He understood that symbols find their end in action and he knew the power of art. Duncan laments that "the tragedy of our time" is that it seems only tyrants have exploited the power of art in communication. Indeed, the balance of our future may hang upon this question: "Democratic leaders too can learn to use the arts for benign purposes, but will they?"

Duncan's sociological bent notwithstanding, his theory as it emerges in this book can properly be called *rhetorical*, and not only because he tells us so in several places. Duncan never wavers from his view of symbolic action as the primary data of social reality, a view well stated in an essay on rhetoric written shortly before his death in 1970. Addressing the subject of form and content in social action, Duncan wrote:

The sociodramatic model is not intended to be a metaphor, an analogy, or a fiction, but a *representation* of social relationships which arise in, and continue to exist through, communicative forms studied best in models derived from dramatic form. The way we communicate is the way we relate.<sup>35</sup>

Further, Duncan treats extensively of persuasion—the ancient central concern of rhetorical theory—as the means of establishing the sort of identification which offers choice and thus permits the possibility of equality. Also, Duncan's treatment of the audience in his detailed consideration of forms of hierarchical address is among the most extensive in the literature. It is astonishing to note the near total neglect of Duncan by subsequent rhetorical theorists, a state of affairs made no easier by the fact that every one of Duncan's six books has gone out of print. On the brighter side, this should make the republication of *Communication and Social Order* an especially welcome event.

Duncan's treatment of the symbolic function of money and his inspired selection of comedy as an exemplification of his theorizing are

among many features which distinguish this work as worthy of sustained attention. And whether talking of money or manners, courtship or comedy, clothes, love, sex, or art, Duncan consistently provides novel insight into the forms and functions of symbolic action. In this time when threats of tyranny and annihilation loom even larger than Duncan could have imagined, his words still speak to these issues, and they do so with both a conscience and a heart.

Having spent some of the better parts of the past year in close quarters with *Communication and Social Order*, if I could send a single message to Hugh Duncan I could hope to do no better than to choose these lines he once wrote to Kenneth Burke:

I have always felt that you were a lonely voyager and there have been times when I sensed that you felt some sort of cold mist closing in about you as you traversed some of the deepest fens. Sometimes I thought this was the way you had to travel to get on with your work; that you would far rather take the risks in the hope of reaching some light, than give up the glory. When we first met it was the wonderful polyphonic quality of your thinking that enchanted me. It still does but now there is something more; the instrumental value of it for saving us from more monsters who know how to use the magic of symbols.<sup>36</sup>

### Notes

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Kenneth Burke, Charles Elkins, and Charles Mann during the preparation of this essay. Any errors of fact or interpretation are, of course, mine alone.

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Boulding, "Hugh Duncan's new book *Communication and Social Order*," *Scientific American* (January 1963).

<sup>2</sup>Hugh Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>3</sup>Hugh Duncan, *Symbols and Social Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>Hugh Duncan, "The Need for Clarification in Social Models of Rhetoric," in *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, ed. Lloyd Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 150.

<sup>5</sup>Duncan to Burke, 3 March 1951. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of the Hugh Duncan-Kenneth Burke correspondence refer to letters archived in the Rare Books and Special Collections of Pattee Library at The Pennsylvania State University. Most of Duncan's other papers, including five unpublished manuscripts, can be found at the Morris Library of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

<sup>6</sup>Duncan to Burke, 3 March 1951.

<sup>7</sup>Duncan to Burke, n.d., approximately March 1952.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

- <sup>10</sup>Duncan to Burke, 14 June 1956.  
<sup>11</sup>Burke to Duncan, 27 August 1955.  
<sup>12</sup>Duncan to Burke, 11 April 1956.  
<sup>13</sup>Burke to Duncan, 17 March 1955.  
<sup>14</sup>Burke to Duncan, 27 August 1955.  
<sup>15</sup>Duncan to Burke, n.d., approximately December 1955.  
<sup>16</sup>Duncan to Burke, 16 December 1956.  
<sup>17</sup>Duncan to Burke, 3 January 1952.  
<sup>18</sup>Duncan to Burke, 7 January 1952.  
<sup>19</sup>Duncan to Burke, 20 June 1951.  
<sup>20</sup>Duncan to Burke, n.d., approximately March 1952.  
<sup>21</sup>Duncan to Burke, 17 September 1951.  
<sup>22</sup>Duncan to Burke, 14 May 1957.  
<sup>23</sup>Charles Elkins, " 'Son of a Burke': The Hugh Dalziel Duncan Collection at Morris Library," *ICarbs: Journal of the Morris Library* (in press).  
<sup>24</sup>Duncan to Burke, 9 October 1956.  
<sup>25</sup>Duncan to Burke, 24 September 1946.  
<sup>26</sup>Duncan to Burke, 25 November 1956.  
<sup>27</sup>Duncan to Burke, 24 August 1951.  
<sup>28</sup>Duncan to Burke, n.d., sometime in 1949.  
<sup>29</sup>Duncan to Burke, 10 August 1949.  
<sup>30</sup>Duncan to Burke, 15 June 1954.  
<sup>31</sup>Duncan to Burke, n.d., sometime in 1949.  
<sup>32</sup>Duncan to Burke, 2 February 1955.  
<sup>33</sup>"A Letter from Hugh Duncan," *Bedminster Letter* (no. 2, January 1963): 5.  
<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4.  
<sup>35</sup>Duncan in *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, p. 143.  
<sup>36</sup>Duncan to Burke, 7 March 1951.