Although the accusation of “demagogue!” and “demagoguery!” run throughout popular and pundit commentary on politics, scholars in rhetoric have become hesitant to use either term. “Demagogue” is too often simply a term we use for an effective rhetor whom we don’t like; it can be inherently elitist, assuming that the masses are incapable of reasonable participation; it can be rationalist, as though the problem with some rhetors is that they appeal to emotion. This talk proposes that scholars of rhetoric should re-engage the question of demagoguery, proposing a definition that is useful, but neither anti-populist nor endorsing the rational-irrational split.

Patricia Roberts-Miller is a Professor in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at UT Austin. Her work focuses on the history, theory, and pedagogy of public argumentation.