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Mark Blaauw-Hara
North Central Michigan College
Petoskey, Michigan

***After the Public Turn: Composition,
Counterpublics, and the Citizen
Bricoleur***

by Frank Farmer. Logan: Utah State UP,
2013. 182 pp.

In his recent work, *After the Public Turn*,



Frank Farmer asserts that capitalism’s con-
sumptive powers and hegemonizing voice
have taken over both the classroom and
our discipline. He suggests that *compo-
sition* has trumped

rhetoric in our current practice—that,
in essence, we have been composed by
neoliberal forces—and notes that while
we may pride ourselves in believing that
we’re a discipline that honors the mar-
ginalized, a more candid self-reflection
will reveal that subaltern views have
been silenced.

Farmer traces three distinct “turns”
in composition theory: the social turn of
the 1980s, the cultural turn of the 1990s,
and the public turn of the present. Like
Steve Parks, Bruce Herzberg, Patricia
Bizzell, Linda Flower, and many others,
he appreciates the energy of the public
turn and the way that it has created
community partnerships and organized
movements toward community literacy.
However, like these scholars, he points
to what these partnerships lack: what
Parks calls “the potential of oppositional
rhetoric” (203). Farmer suggests that
while our turn to the public gave us a
foundation for democratic praxis, our
discipline allowed itself to be consumed
instead.

In part 1 of the book, “Cultural
Publics,” Farmer shares his concern
that we only allow our students to see
in “officially approved ways” (29) when
we assign traditional genres for student
writing. He wants us, instead, to provide
genres that are vehicles for change, and
he offers the zine as one example of a
more democratic form. While zines are
not new, Farmer argues that they dem-
onstrate the DIY spirit, providing an
opportunity for writers to take available
tools and frameworks and reconstruct
them, thereby responding in novel ways.
The zine, he argues, “reject[s] the trap-
pings of consumerist capitalism and its
accompanying vision of a putative ‘good
life’” (37). Chapter 2 further develops

this idea, moving beyond the idea of zine as cultural artifact to zine as cultural public: “a cultural public [is] any social formation, established primarily through texts, whose constructed identity functions, in some measure, to oppose and critique the accepted norms of the society in which it emerges” (56).

Part 2 of Farmer’s work, “Disciplinary Publics,” moves from our student population and their needs to the challenges the public turn poses for faculty. Chapter 3 begins by asserting that we are like our students, in that the public turn “is concomitantly a search for the forms by which going public may be legitimized” (102). The final chapter of the book brings the conversation back to the reader in a very direct way. Farmer asks, what has happened to composition and rhetoric’s rejoinder to voices such as Stanley Fish, Louis Menand, and Heather MacDonald? These voices—voices that originate outside composition and rhetoric—have controlled the discourse regarding American education, the social responsibility of faculty, and, very specifically, the teaching of writing. Like our students, he argues, we have allowed ourselves to be consumed and composed by others. He asks us to reclaim the art of rhetoric; in this moment, we, too, are a counterpublic (147).

Both inside and outside the classroom, Farmer wants writers to become agents of social change. In a moment where most of us feel astounded by our own silence, he demands that we shift our energies, rethinking our allegiance to *composition*—decorum, form, acceptance—to a privileging of rhetoric. Like Gerald Graff in *Professing Literature*, he insists that this is a two-pronged conversation, one with the goal of transpar-

ency in connecting the classroom to its surrounding structure. Like Christopher Breu, he insists on creative uses of the material at hand: “there can be no effective politics or political struggle without a careful attention to the material and discursive circumstances in which we find ourselves thinking, working, and acting.”

The instructor who seeks classroom-ready genres for this work will want more—the zine is a starting point—but Farmer’s purpose is elsewhere. He insists that we help our students to become agents of social change, and for those of us in the two-year college, the teachers of the majority of American college students and the workers who struggle in an increasingly exploited labor pool, there couldn’t be more at stake. In the end, Farmer’s work reframes our own, bringing us back to the philosophical underpinnings of what it is to write and reminding us why it is so important that we shift our ideas about the purpose of writing in this moment of the public turn.

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Jill Darley-Vanis
Clark College
Vancouver, Washington