

Constructing
THE *Political*
Spectacle

MURRAY EDELMAN

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO AND LONDON

Acknowledgments

Just as the political spectacle is a construction, so is an author; my largest debts are owed to writers, teachers, and students who helped shape this book by constructing me, even if they are not cited. The colleagues who shaped it more directly through their trenchant criticisms of all or parts of the manuscript include Lance Bennett, James Farr, Martha Fineman, Gerda Lerner, Michael Lipsky, Cathy May, Richard Merelman, Martha Minow, Laurel Munger, Rozann Rothman, and Virginia Sapiro.

A John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship furnished support for my first book on political symbolism in the sixties, and a second Guggenheim Fellowship provided some of the time to write this one, as did a grant from the University of Wisconsin Research Board.

As a student of political language and symbolism, I am indebted in a different way to the countless public officials and representatives of political causes who spend their time giving me more data than I want, much of it disturbing or outrageous.

Lori Schlinkert and Renee Gibson inscribed the manuscript on floppy disks and revised it competently and patiently.

I Some Premises about Politics

The pervasiveness of literacy, television, and radio in the industrialized world makes frequent reports of political news available to most of the population, a marked change from the situation that prevailed until approximately the Second World War. What consequences for ideology, action, and quiescence flow from preoccupation with political news as spectacle? How does the spectacle generate interpretations? What are its implications for democratic theory? Those are the questions addressed in this book.

core questions

There is a conventional answer that can be captured in a sentence rather than a volume: citizens who are informed about political developments can more effectively protect and promote their own interests and the public interest. That response takes for granted a world of facts that have a determinable meaning and a world of people who react rationally to the facts they know. In politics neither premise is tenable, a conclusion that history continually reaffirms and that observers of the political scene are tempted to ignore. To explore that conclusion is not likely to generate an optimistic book or a reassuring view of the human condition; but I hope this book will provide a realistic appreciation of the link between politics and well-being and a greater chance that political action can be effective.

X

The spectacle constituted by news reporting continuously constructs and reconstructs social problems, crises, enemies, and leaders and so creates a succession of threats and reassurances. These constructed problems and personalities furnish the content of political journalism and the data for historical and analytic political studies. They also play a central role in winning support and opposition for political causes and policies.

The latter role is usually masked by the assumption that citizens, journalists, and scholars are observers of "facts" whose meanings can be accurately ascertained by those who are properly trained and motivated. That positivist view is accepted rather than defended today. We are acutely aware that observers and what they observe construct one other; that political develop-

ments are ambiguous entities that mean what concerned observers construe them to mean; and that the roles and self-concepts of the observers themselves are also constructions, created at least in part by their interpreted observations.¹

This study is an essay in applying that epistemological principle to politics. Rather than seeing political news as an account of events to which people react, I treat political developments as creations of the publics concerned with them. Whether events are noticed and what they mean depend upon observers' situations and the language that reflects and interprets those situations. A social problem, a political enemy, or a leader is both an entity and a signifier with a range of meanings that vary in ways we can at least partly understand. Similarly, I treat people who engage in political actions as constructions in two senses. First, their actions and their language create their subjectivity, their sense of who they are. Second, people involved in politics are symbols to other observers: they stand for ideologies, values, or moral stances and they become role models, benchmarks, or symbols of threat and evil.

My focus, in short, is upon people and developments with multiple and changing meanings to one another. That perspective offers a difficult analytic challenge because entities do not remain stable while you study them and subjects and objects are continuously evolving constructions of each other. Historical evidence and psychological theory nonetheless support these assumptions. In every era and every national culture, political controversy and maneuver have hinged upon conflicting interpretations of current actions and developments: leaders are perceived as tyrannical or benevolent, wars as just or aggressive, economic policies as supports of a class or the public interest, minorities as pathological or helpful. It is precisely such differences about the referents of politically significant signs that constitute political and social history.

If political developments depended upon factual observations, false meanings would be discredited in time and a con-

1. Two recent books, one by an eminent philosopher and the other by an eminent psychologist, expound the conceptual framework I apply here in some detail: Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

sensus upon valid ones would emerge, at least among informed and educated observers. That does not happen, even over long time periods. The characteristic of problems, leaders, and enemies that makes them political is precisely that controversy over their meanings is not resolved. Whether poverty originates in the inadequacies of its victims or in the pathologies of social institutions, whether a leader's actions are beneficial or damaging to the polity, whether a foreign, racial, religious, or ethnic group is an enemy or a desirable ally, typify the questions that persist indefinitely and remain controversial as historical issues just as they were controversial in their time. The debates over such questions constitute politics and catalyze political action. There is no politics respecting matters that evoke a consensus about the pertinent facts, their meanings, and the rational course of action.

It is just as evident that individuals' opinions on political issues change with transformations in their social situations, with cues about the probable future consequences of political actions, with information about the sources and authoritative support for policies, and with the groups with whom they identify. The meanings of the self, the other, and the social object are facets of the same transaction, changing and remaining stable as those others do. Psychological theorists as diverse as Mead, Vygotsky, Marcuse, and Festinger concur on this point with the lesson of historical observation. The radical student who becomes a conventional liberal or conservative with graduation to new jobs and new ambition, the dedicated communist who becomes a fervent anticommunist, the liberal who becomes a neoconservative, the pacifists who support war when their country is about to embark on one, are recurring examples of the principle that political self-definitions and roles reflect the conditions, constraints, and opportunities in which people find themselves: that ideology and material conditions are part of the same transaction. To understand either stability or change, it is necessary to look to the social situations people experience, anticipate, or fantasize.

The incentive to reduce ambiguity to certainty, multivalent people to egos with fixed ideologies, and the observer's predilections to the essence of rationality pervades everyday discourse and social science practice. These premises reassure observers that their own interpretations are defensible. And there is a related reason that the conventional view is appealing: its implicit

promise that rationality and information will end the uninterrupted record of war, poverty, cruelty and other evils that have marked human history; that rational choice may never be optimal, but is a central influence in decision making, policy formation, and voting, and is likely to become a stronger one.

The alternative assumption denies a sharp break between the past and the future; the political language that has rationalized privileges, disadvantages, aggressions, and violence in the past is likely to continue to do so; the phrase "rational choice" is one more symbol in the process of rationalization rather than the path to enlightenment. Pessimistic conclusions are disturbing but are not reasons for rejecting the premises from which they flow. On the contrary, any political analysis that encourages belief in a secure, rational, and cooperative world fails the test of conformity to experience and to the record of history.

The kinds of empirical observations already mentioned and others to be noted later support the view that interpretations of political news construct diverse realities. Many influential social theories of the twentieth century point to the same conclusion. In his recent books Nelson Goodman has analyzed with impressive rigor and clarity the process of what he calls "making worlds." Goodman sees science, art, and other cultural forms as "ways of worldmaking."² So far as politics is concerned, news reporting is a major way as well, complementing scientific claims and works of art. The realities people experience, then, are not the same for every person or for all time, but rather are relative to social situations and to the signifiers to which observers pay some attention. The chapters that follow illustrate that premise.

But relativism is unsettling. It leaves us without a reassuring test of what is real and of who we are; and relativist propositions cannot be verified or falsified in the positivist sense because they pose the Mannheim Paradox problem: observers who postulate that the meanings of observations vary with the social situation or with something else must take the same skeptical and tentative position with respect to their own relativism.

Belief in the verifiability (or falsifiability) of observations, the separability of facts from values, and the possibility of relying

2. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978); and Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*.

upon deduction to establish valid generalizations is a formula for self-assurance, even for dogmatism, as well as for claims to power over others. But if those assumptions are invalid, if knowledge and meanings are in any sense relative to other knowledge and to the observer's social position, then neither precision in observation nor rigor in deductive reasoning will yield acceptable "covering laws" or generalizations. They offer an appearance of doing so as long as attention is diverted from the problematic premises; but reliance upon that conceptual framework for doing social science is rather like looking under the lamppost, where the light is good, for the quarter one dropped in a dark section of the street.

Critics of relativist positions charge that the latter make it impossible to test their own assumptions and conclusions because these conclusions are *also* relative to something else; but that claim should not be mistaken for an affirmation that relativist positions are false. The claim is only that they cannot be conclusively established as true. But the same must be said of the positivist position. There is reason for tentativeness about all forms of explanation. Relativist positions are not uniquely vulnerable with respect to verification or falsification. Reasons for support or for doubt are all mortals can hope for. Final conclusions, like final solutions, are for dogmatists.

There is a moral argument for rejecting relativism as well: the contention that it justifies any kind of behavior at all because it fails to provide an absolute ethical standard. Both logic and historical experience dispute that conclusion. A relativist posture in no way denies the need for a clear moral code; it recognizes, rather, that interpretations of actions do vary with social situations. Acceptance of that variation encourages careful examination of moral claims and tentativeness in applying them in ways that others might find objectionable or harmful; but it neither establishes nor undermines the moral code of an individual or a group. x

It is moral certainty, not tentativeness, that historically has encouraged people to harm or kill others. Genocide, racial and religious persecution, and the rest of the long catalogue of political acts that have stained human history can only come from people who are sure that they are right. Only in bad novels and comic books do characters knowingly do evil and boast of it. In life, people rationalize their actions in moral terms, an

observation that suggests that relativism is a buttress of the moral life because it encourages a critical and reflective stance toward others' actions and toward one's own.

Some critics contend that anyone who believes that realities are constructed and multiple must also believe that they are equally valid, but that conclusion does not follow. On the contrary, the notion of reality construction implies that some are valid and others not. There are multiple realities because people differ in their situations and their purposes. The reality an impressionist painter constructs respecting a maritime scene is not that of a sailor or that of an atomic physicist. The reality a destitute black person constructs respecting the nature of poverty has little validity for a conservative political candidate or a conservative political scientist or even for the same black when he is trying to achieve high grades in a business school. Every construction of a world is a demanding activity. It can be done well or badly and be right or wrong. To understand the multiple realities are prevalent is liberating, but such understanding in no way suggests that every construction is as good as every other.³

Social scientists who deny that there are many worlds cut themselves off from vital modes of observation and interpretation; but they reject their intellectual and moral obligations and their capabilities if they do not also recognize some realities as more valid than others for those who construct them and for social analysts.

Materialism, Idealism, and Indifference

Politicians, officials, journalists whose careers depend on news stories, advocates of causes, and a fair number of people who are continually concerned, shocked, entertained, or titillated by the news constitute an avid audience for the political spectacle. For them there are weekly, daily, sometimes hourly triumphs and defeats, grounds for hope and for fear, a potpourri of happenings that mark trends and aberrations, some of them historic. Political life is hyperreal: typically more portentous than personal affairs.

But most of the world's population, even most of the popula-

3. I discussed this position in *Political Language* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), 5-20. See also Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 17-22. For a contrary view, see William Connolly's review of *Political Language* in *American Political Science Review* 73 (September 1979): 847.

tion of the "advanced countries," has no incentive to define joy, failure, or hope in terms of public affairs. Politics and political news are remote, not often interesting, and for the most part irrelevant. This indifference of "the masses" to the enthusiasms and fears of people who thrive on public attention to political matters is the despair of the latter group. Public indifference is deplored by politicians and by right-thinking citizens. It is the target of civics courses, oratory, and television news shows and the reiterated theme of polls that discover how little political information the public has and how low politics rates among public concerns.

Actions that show resistance to political involvement are even more persuasive than surveys. Nonvoters constitute a larger political grouping in America than the adherents of any political party. Only a small proportion of the population contributes money for political purposes, engages in any other kind of political activity, or pays more than passing attention to political news.⁴

That indifference, which academic political science notices but treats as an obstacle to enlightenment or democracy, is, from another perspective, a refuge against the kind of engagement that would, if it could, keep everyone's energies taken up with activism: election campaigns, lobbying, repressing some and liberating others, wars, and all other political activities that displace living, loving, and creative work. Regimes and proponents of political causes know that it takes much coercion, propaganda, and the portrayal of issues in terms that entertain, distort, and shock to extract a public response of any kind. "The public" is mainly a black hole into which the political efforts of politicians, advocates of causes, the media, and the schools disappear with hardly a trace.⁵ Its apathy, indifference, quiescence, and resistance to the consciousness industry⁶ is especially impressive in an age of widespread literacy and virtually universal access to the

4. For survey data on the low level of political information among adults see Robert S. Erikson, Norman R. Luttbeg, and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley, 1980), 19.

5. Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semiotext, 1983), 1-64.

6. The term comes from Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

media. Indifference to the enthusiasms and alarms of political activists has very likely always been a paramount political force, though only partially effective and hard to recognize because it is a nonaction. Without it, the slaughter and repression of diverse groups in the name of nationalism, morality, or rationality would certainly be even more widespread than it has been; for the claim that a political cause serves the public interest has often distorted or destroyed concern for personal wellbeing.

Recognition of the power that springs from indifference to political appeals is a precondition for understanding the effectiveness of political symbolism. Symbols, whether language or icons, that have no relevance to everyday lives, frustrations, and successes are meaningless and impotent. They are like the reactions of spectators in a museum to the icons of a culture with which they feel no empathy. In the measure that political advocates resort to appeals that do not touch the experiences of their audience, indifference is to be expected.

X (Symbols become that facet of experiencing the material world that gives it a specific meaning. The language, rituals, and objects to which people respond are not abstract ideas. If they matter at all, it is because they are accepted as basic to the quality of life. The term "unemployment" may evoke a yawn from an affluent person who has never feared it. It carries a more intense connotation in a depression than at other times even for workers who are always vulnerable to layoffs. A flag may be a garish piece of cloth, a reminder of the repressions and sufferings justified by appeals to patriotism, or an evocation of nostalgia for a land in which one grew up or for the stories about its history one learned as a child. A symbol always carries a range of diverse, often conflicting, meanings that are integral aspects of specific material and social situations. The material condition as experienced and the symbol as experienced stand for each other. The psychological processes by which they come to do so are doubtless subtle and complex and are certainly not fully understood. They may involve the displacement of private affect onto public objects, as Harold Lasswell suggested,⁷ or a search for self-esteem⁸ or a rational calculation,

7. Harold D. Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930).

8. Paul M. Sniderman, *Personality and Democratic Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

or a combination of functions. In any case the material basis for the symbol is critical. My references in this book to language or actions or objects that evoke meanings always presuppose that the "evocation" takes place only as a function of a specific material and social condition. Idealism and materialism are dichotomies as abstract concepts, but in everyday life they are facets of the same transaction. Every sign exercises its effect because of the specific context of privilege, disadvantage, frustration, aspiration, hope, and fear in which it is experienced.

The Incoherence of the Subject, the Object, and the Text

These observations about my conceptual framework foreshadow a more general point of view that grows out of the work of George Herbert Mead and Lev Vygotsky and is also explicit in the writings of the French poststructuralists, especially Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

The subject cannot be regarded as the origin of coherent action, writing, or other forms of expression. As just noted, actions and interpretations hinge upon the social situation in which they begin, including the language that depicts a social situation. The language that interprets objects and actions also constitutes the subject. Political leaders, like all other subjects, act and speak as reflections of the situations they serially confront; their diversities and inconsistencies are statements of those situations, not of a persistent "self," for the kind of stability in action that transcends situations with varying political inducements has never existed. Chapter 3, on "political leadership," examines the sense in which that perspective undermines the premise, itself constructed very largely by the term "leader," that identifiable officials are originators of coherent courses of action. That chapter also explores the distortions in analysis implicit in the conventional assumptions about political leaders.⁹

9. The same lesson applies, of course, to the term "author." In writing this book I also am constituted by a range of disparate sources and inducements, including such contradictory ones as the poststructuralist writers who impress me now and the conventional political scientists I read as a graduate student and whose work I may have learned too well. If the idea that language that depicts discontinuity is itself discontinuous and self-contradictory induces a sense of vertigo, that is preferable to reassuring assumptions that divert analysis from an account of the discontinuities of the social world. The vertigo may stimulate criticism and insight.

It is probably less jarring to recognize that political objects and events are also discontinuous, sometimes contradictory, entities constituted by the signifiers and contexts that give them meanings, a point of view considered in some detail in chapters 2 and 4. Quite apart from the examples that emerge with every careful examination of a political object, entities are necessarily incoherent because the language that constructs their meaning is inherently discontinuous and in some sense undermines itself.¹⁰ Affirmations bring to consciousness evidence for the contrary position, which the affirmations try to blunt, a form of inversion and sometimes of self deception that is especially pervasive in political language. When an American official claims that client states like El Salvador or Guatemala are protecting human rights, the statement also reminds those who hear it of evidence that they are not doing so. Every instance of language and action resonates with the memory, the fear, or the anticipation of other signifiers, so that there are radiating networks of meaning that vary with the situations of spectators and actors.

That framework gives political action, talk, writing, and news reporting a different import from that taken for granted in politicians' statements and in conventional social science writing. Accounts of political issues, problems, crises, threats, and leaders now become devices for creating disparate assumptions and beliefs about the social and political world rather than factual statements. The very concept of "fact" becomes irrelevant because every meaningful political object and person is an interpretation that reflects and perpetuates an ideology. Taken together, they comprise a spectacle which varies with the social situation of the spectator and serves as a meaning machine: a generator of points of view and therefore of perceptions, anxieties, aspirations, and strategies. The conventional distinction between procedures and outcomes loses its salience because both are now signifiers, generators of meanings that shape political quiescence, arousal, and support or opposition to causes. The denotations of key political terms become suspect because lead-

10. The point is developed in the work of Jacques Derrida, and also in Kenneth Burke's writing on political rhetoric. See Burke, *The Grammar of Motives* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1945).

ers are not originators of courses of action, problems are not necessarily undesirable conditions to be solved, and enemies need not do or threaten harm. Instead, the uses of all such terms in specific situations are strategies, deliberate or unrecognized, for strengthening or undermining support for specific courses of action and for particular ideologies.

The political entities that are most influential upon public consciousness and action, then, are *fetishes*: creations of observers that then dominate and mystify their creators. I try here to analyze the pervasive consequences of the fetishism at the core of politics, never a wholly successful enterprise because it is tempting to exorcise a fetish by constructing a rational theory of politics.