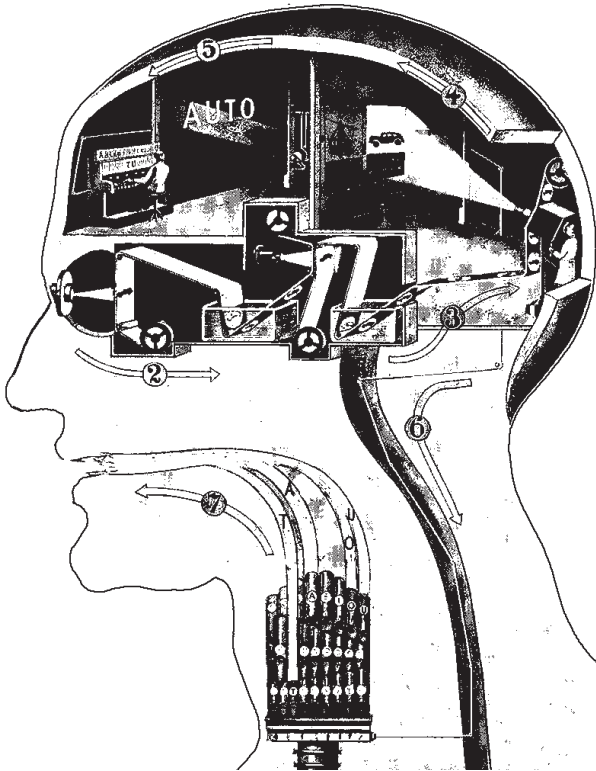


Politics and the Myth of Choice



A Manifesto by Dagwood Engelberg

1. Politics and Symbolism

When a parking checker hands out a ticket, is that a political act? Somebody on the receiving end of a ticket may curse the government, but that individual ticket is more the result of bureaucratic policies and procedures than of political negotiation between citizen and officer. The parking enforcer is a functionary, not a policy-maker, not a politician, not someone who employs cunning and calculation to influence the behavior of some citizen or another. True enough, that functionary wields the coercive power of government; yet, the more successful politicians appeal to symbolism rather than employ coercion against the population.

As a symbolic order, politics plays two roles: that of reflecting prevailing moods, and that of influencing public perception. It is not unlike a thermostat, which regulates the temperature of a room both by reading the temperature, and by turning on the furnace to change the temperature. The two symbolic roles of politics mutually reinforce one another. As individuals adjust their values relative to the symbolic articulations of politics, the result of this mutually-reinforcing dynamic is conformity among the population.

Ideas that challenge the underlying assumptions of political symbolism are automatically marginalized. Because such novel ideas do not accept the validity of the prevailing symbolic order, such ideas are not on the whole recognized as possessing any validity, even if they are correct or show significant insight. Thus, politics serves primarily as a mechanism to counterbalance forces of change; where politicians characterize themselves as having unique insights of vital import, their role is primarily to reinforce existing social conditions. Because politics is symbolic, the key to influencing political attitudes lies in acts of symbolic import. A change in "leadership" does little to change the prevailing symbolic order because belief in leadership is itself a mechanism used to enforce conformity.

2. Politics and Voting

For virtually the whole of US history, more people have been excluded from the democratic process than included in it.

From 1787 to 1868, the law limited eligible voters to white males. Women were denied suffrage until 1920. Blacks were not afforded full rights until 1964. At the turn of the 21st Century, one in five black men are denied voting rights, and many adults choose not to exercise their right to vote.

It is said in these times that Americans are highly polarized. Yet this can only be said with any certainty of that subset of adults who act on the belief that electoral politics is the most effective means to enact social change. The majority of Americans are disaffected, and are effectively ruled by the preferences of one or another political minority, responding to the symbolism articulated by still fewer individuals.

Children are the largest demographic currently lacking political representation. It may rightly be said that the brains of children are not fully formed, and that they lack experience, and so there is a rational basis for denying them political representation. But it is nonsensical to deny that there are things children would like to see happen with the country they will inherit.

Take a child from the suburbs, whose grade school has ample play equipment, a nice slide and a jungle gym and a sandbox and a grass field to play soccer on, and show that child an inner city school, for which a patch of barren blacktop caged with a chain link fence must suffice for a playground. Chances are, the child from the suburbs would immediately apprehend the glaring inequality, and feel compelled to demand change.

Children have an inherent notion of what is fair. The nearer they come to voting age, the more likely it is that this notion of fairness has been wrested from them, or else perverted beyond recognition.

3. Voting and Politicians

Beyond the features of politics itself which serve to counteract forces of change, it is worth considering the role of the individual politician in this dynamic. When a politician speaks about “my constituents,” this wording reveals an inversion of conventional assumptions about the source of power in electoral politics.

As somebody with access to authority and the media, the politician sets about articulating the symbols that guide the perceptions and behaviors of many citizens. Under a traditional analysis, this relationship is called “the consent of the governed,” where individuals authorize representatives to make decisions on their behalf. Where these politicians lack any direct electoral evidence regarding the preferences of the disaffected majority, the relationship of these disaffected citizens to their government becomes that of subject to ruler. In such cases, authority is neither accepted nor rejected: it is simply a fact. Democracy never enters into the equation.

The individual politician has an interest in seeing that as few citizens as possible exercise their voting rights. The range of attitudes among voters is thereby narrowed. Voters are prone to dismiss non-voters as apathetic, and to discount the beliefs of both non-voters and those who vote for opposing candidates. This increases the likelihood that a particular symbolic articulation will have the desired effect on that narrow set of citizens who allow such articulations to shape their thoughts and behavior. The laws, policies, and procedures put in place by politicians then ensure that the thought and behavior of the non-voting majority is similarly brought under control.

Thus, the extent to which the politician changes his or her behavior due to voter preference is minimized, and the extent to which citizens must adapt to the behavior of politicians is maximized.

4. Voting and Change

Voting is a relatively ineffective means to enact social change because, first and foremost, the act of voting serves to legitimate the power structure that an individual voter seeks to change. Most social change occurs outside the realm of electoral politics and within the sphere of industrial commerce.

The modern corporation is in large measure defined by organizational prowess. To a large extent, this prowess is directed towards manipulating the behavior of individuals. Given the exclusive nature of politics -- both in terms of who can attain

office, and in terms of the efficacy of voting -- individuals are left with little recourse to counterbalancing organizations of similar sophistication.

Branding, marketing and advertising use symbolic appeals to alter an individual's perception of his or her environment, which changes what calculations individuals perform when deciding how to allocate such resources as time, money, and the use of land. These methods of manipulation do not attempt to materially change what individuals have need for; they are not a means to organize national resources towards the universal attainment of food security, quality shelter, suitable clothing, and rewarding social interaction. Rather, these methods of manipulation create desires that change how individuals satisfy their needs. The satisfaction of basic needs is almost a side-effect of branding.

5. Branding and Change

While conventional economic analyses suggest that rational individuals will seek to procure the most product at the least expense, individuals routinely purchase instead those products with the most appealing branding or advertising. Even if, at a given price, one brand offers less product than an alternative, the product with the more satisfying symbolism often wins out. While this form of competition may at first glance appear to be the essence of markets, in this context, it represents a systematic campaign to undermine the rational agency of individuals. The traditional conception of rational agency is replaced with a more limited form of calculating behavior.

Marketing manipulates people by articulating meaningful symbols that create new desires. Individuals who adopt the values these symbols represent pressure peers to conform, and thereby propagate the messages used to articulate these symbols. Sometimes these messages foster anxieties that create a desire for various types of security; sometimes these messages appeal to a desire for ego gratification or personal validation; yet other times these messages create a desire for membership in a self-selecting group. The common denominator is that marketing promotes specific products as a means to fulfill these invented

desires, even if the connection between the use of a given product and the desire it is presented as able to fulfill is rather tenuous.

The conventional wisdom, which implies that these products and these messages must be so prevalent because they reflect the presence of a genuine need, or else that they supply some demand, reinforces the strength and the perceived validity of marketing's social manipulations.

The prevalence of these messages is a sort of social violence, however, rather than an expression of a society cooperating to attain some goal. A billboard that blends gracefully into the landscape is useless: it must be visually disruptive to be effective. The same principle holds true with other forms of advertising and marketing.

To the individual, the behavioral changes brought about by branding and marketing are nearly imperceptible. Basic needs are indeed satisfied by various products. However, the extent of branding's influence can be seen most clearly when presented in contrast to conventional wisdom.

Conventional wisdom holds that in a market economy, supply follows demand. In an industrial economy, however, demand often follows supply. Apple Computer, which is famously secretive about new product announcements, arranged for the manufacture of millions of iPods before publicly announcing their product. Apple used marketing to create demand where previously there was none. Their campaign changed the cultural landscape without any input from democratic procedures.

For advocates of markets, it may serve as a convenient metaphor to suggest that individuals vote with their dollars; if taken literally, however, such a position not only violates the democratic principle that each person is granted only one vote, but furthermore omits the fact that management positions within corporations are not occupied by elected office holders. Where government publishes its laws, the management practices of corporations may just as likely be considered proprietary. In principle, government is accountable to all citizens; corporations need only concern themselves with the board of directors. Corporations need not even be accountable to existing customers: in many cases, new customers can just as easily be created.

The contemporary movement to privatize public services is therefore incompatible with the goals of a democratic society. It is a movement to take public resources and remove them from the democratic control of citizens who would use rational means to satisfy their needs. While it may be argued that privatization is subject to oversight, such institutional oversight is not a substitute for the democratic control of institutions. The organization of corporations is characterized by top-down authority rather than bottom-up democracy. Where privatized institutions are able to guarantee reliable service, it is in virtue of authoritarian measures rather than market competition, which, if it is fair, is by definition unpredictable. Markets offer few guarantees and are an unsuitable means for the safeguarding of rights.

6. Prerequisites for Change

Because so many forces are organized against individuals seeking substantive social change, individuals opposed to these coercive pressures first and foremost need a sense of group identity. Uncontrolled rioting might destabilize entrenched power structures, but uncontrolled rioting does little to prevent a more oppressive regime from stepping in to fill that power vacuum. Effective opposition therefore needs a coherent identity around which to organize, an identity capable of maintaining an analysis of how prevailing conditions might be transformed into something more preferable. Party affiliation and brand loyalty are wholly insufficient in this regard, as these forms of group identity are the principal sources of the coercive pressures at issue. Because social media and network access are so tightly bound up with the interests of these same coercive pressures, other avenues of social coordination must be sought out.

Effective coordination of opposition need not focus exclusively on a single message, so long as all messages issued by the opposition can be derived from a common root. The emphasis need not be on uniformity, so long as diversity is organized. This organization need not be the product of central direction, so long as it acts in synchrony.

The importance of synchrony in today's society is underappreciated. Consider the clock: we are accustomed to thinking

of clocks as a way to objectively measure the passage of time, to measure out the day. But more significantly, clocks are a distributed means to synchronize the behavior of large numbers of individuals who are otherwise not in communication with one another.

In an important sense, even computers are little more than elaborate timing devices. Just about every aspect of modern life is mediated by one or another form of synchrony. Weekends are observed, not organized by consensus each week. Moreover, various synchronizing behaviors are common among all orders of living things, ranging from dictyostelium to fireflies to mammals, and become increasingly important as social organizations increase in complexity.

7. Program for Change

National elections are a means of synchronizing the attitudes and behavior of many diverse people; yet attempts to use the vote to enact social change are routinely frustrated both by the nature of electoral politics, and by the overwhelming organizational sophistication of the modern corporation. Even voters who support third-party candidates are routinely brought into conformity when they are told that they are “throwing their vote away” or that “this election is too important” to risk on a third party. If these statements are taken at face value, it follows that whoever votes for a losing candidate throws away his or her vote, and that every election will be deemed too important to risk a substantive change in voting behavior.

An alternative course of action is to separate the act of voting from electoral politics. Such an approach recognizes the usefulness of the existing voting apparatus as a means of communication, but exploits this means of communication for a purpose other than to install some individual in office.

Practically, this involves voting for oneself as a write-in candidate, coupled with the advocacy of this same tactic. While it is similar to a “no confidence” vote, more importantly, it represents a way for individuals, through a coordinated symbolic gesture, to demonstrate that they are willing to change their

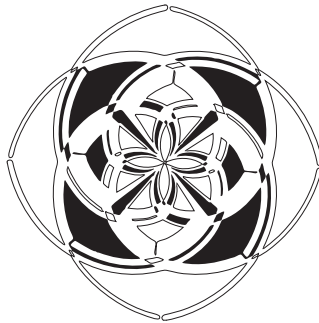
behavior in order to bring about more substantive change. It asks individuals to come to terms with the reality that electoral politics on a national level has broken down.

If enough people participate, such a tactic will create a numerical “black hole” in the national election results, which will be difficult for the media or politicians to re-cast or spin. This will present an opportunity for a focused discussion about the integrity and efficacy of elections as presently conducted. As a method for disaffected voters to coordinate their attitudes, this tactic not only allows disaffected voters to get a sense for how many other like-minded individuals are out there, but can thereby serve as the basis for more organized behavior.

Organizationally, this tactic has distinct advantages: it focuses on individual initiative rather than rely on some external body for direction; it is non-violent; and it is inexpensive. In terms of the logic of branding, where this tactic coincides with the ideology of American individualism, it encapsulates a positive program of social change that encourages voters to vote for what they believe in rather than against what they fear. In terms of the quantitative nature of voting, this tactic suggests specific goals: given that 5% of the popular vote in a federal election qualifies a party for federal matching funds, a “black hole” of 5% represents a degree of participation that is both statistically and statutorily significant.

Those individuals whose fear leads them to believe that engaging with such a tactic might be deleterious for the nation, insofar as a 5% change in voter behavior might tip an election in favor of “the other side,” should, first and foremost, direct their advocacy towards non-voters. Furthermore, similarly concerned individuals should consider the current polarization of voters rationally rather than emotionally.

In 2000, the Florida recount was triggered by statute because less than one half of 1% of votes separated George W. Bush from Al Gore. If one accepts the validity of that election, one must then accept that an election settled by less than the statistical margin of error by definition says nothing about voter preference. An election so close might as well be settled by chance. A power vacuum already exists that is being actively exploited, and major party electoral politics is not the solution.



Applied Chaos Dynamics Control Association

Fall 2011

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