

Constructing THE Political Spectacle



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events are ambiguous events that mean what concerned observers construct 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.⁴

This leads to an essay in applying that epistemological principle to politics. Rather than seeing political events as an account of events to which people react, I treat political developments as creations of the public concerned with them. Whether events are political and what they mean depend upon observers' situations and the language that reflects and interprets those situations. A social problem, a political crisis, or a leader is both an entity and a symbol 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 nevertheless 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, war as just or unjust, economic policies as supports of a class or the public interest, movements as pathological or helpful. It is precisely such differences about the relevance of politically significant events that constitute political and social history.

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

4. These same truths, one by an eminent philosopher and the other by an eminent psychologist, supported the conceptual framework I apply here in some detail. Nelson Goodman, *Of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976); Sigmund Freud, *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York, Basic Books, 1963).

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? These are the questions addressed in this book.

There is a conventional answer that can be captured in a sentence rather than a volume: citizens who are ignorant about political developments can mean effectively protest and pressure their own representatives in 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, whether protest is sensible, 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.

The spectacle constructed by news reporting continuously constructs and reconstructs social problems, crises, concerns, 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 mutually aware that observers and what they observe construct one another; that political develop-

no facts + no reality exist in history alone re government

mean upon valid ones would emerge, at least among informed and ethical observers. That does not happen, even over long time periods. The characteristics of problems, leaders, and events that makes them political is precisely that controversy over their meanings is not resolved. Whether poverty originates in the inadequacy 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 others, and the social object are facets of the same transaction, changing and remaining stable as those others do. Psychological theories as diverse as Freud, Vygotsky, Maslow, and Festinger converge on this point with the lesson of historical observation. The radical student who becomes a conventional liberal or conservative with graduation to secure jobs and new ambitions, the dedicated communist who becomes a fervent anti-communist, the liberal who becomes a neo-conservative, the pacifist who supports war when their country is about to attack, or vice, are recurring examples of the principle that political self definitions and roles reflect the conditions, circumstances, and opportunities in which people find themselves, that ideology and social institutions are part of the same transaction. To understand whether stability or change, it is necessary to look to the social situations people experience, anticipate, or fantasize.

The incentive to reduce ambiguity to certainty, enables even people to agree with fixed ideologies, and the observer's predicaments in the course of necessary everyday discourse and social science practice. These premises require observers

Constructing The Political Spectacle

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Table of Contents Constructing The Political Spectacle

1. Understanding the eBook Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Constructing The Political Spectacle User Reviews and Ratings
 - Constructing The Political Spectacle and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Constructing The Political Spectacle Free and Paid eBooks

- Constructing The Political Spectacle Public Domain eBooks
- Constructing The Political Spectacle eBook Subscription Services
- Constructing The Political Spectacle Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Constructing The Political Spectacle eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Constructing The Political Spectacle Compatibility with Devices
 - Constructing The Political Spectacle Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Interactive Elements Constructing The Political Spectacle
- 8. Staying Engaged with Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Constructing The Political Spectacle
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Constructing The Political Spectacle
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Setting Reading Goals Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Constructing The Political Spectacle
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development

- Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
- Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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