

A Counter-Statement to Depoliticizations

Mediation and Simulational Politics

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Carl Boggs, in *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere*, laments the decline of civic participation, “the profound deterioration of political discourse” (vii), in sum the end of politics especially in western cultures and most especially in the United States. Today, he claims, “we live in a thoroughly depoliticized society” (17). Boggs is not alone in his concerns; similarly, Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* observes a lack of public civic engagement in traditional forms of community and politics. These and other writers, sharing Boggs’s conception of politics as “the ever broadening capacity of whole populations to be engaged in the vital affairs of public life” (97), complain of reduced voter turnout, lack of interest in public political events, and general inability to debate social and political issues with substance.

Dire predictions of the decline of politics seem similar to histories that assert the waxing and waning of rhetoric during different periods (e.g., Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, 1-15). But Boggs agrees with Antonio Gramsci’s observation that “man is essentially ‘political’” (243; Gramsci, 360), just as many have observed that rhetoric is an essential part of being human (Brummett, *Reading* 1). If both politics and rhetoric are fundamental dimensions of humanity, then perhaps these dimensions neither decline nor strengthen but rather, change in terms of form, manifestation, and sites of expression. The task of the scholar then is to be alert for new forms of politics as well as communication, to avoid assuming that change or difference must necessarily be for the worse, and to balance despair and naivete as one seeks to understand the world in the process of recreation. My purpose in this essay is to sketch out some ways in which we might do that at the intersection between politics and rhetoric. I will suggest some places to look for new political discursive forms in the world that Boggs describes, a world of corporate hegemony and infatuation with mediated entertainment that may nevertheless contain new sites for the venerable practice of political rhetoric.¹ Taking Boggs as representative of a wider group of scholars concerned with the state of politics, I will suggest a different way to understand the world that Boggs sees. In its place I will point to new forms of political discourse that are *simulational*, *erotic*, and *local*.

Bracketing and Representation in Traditional Political Forms

Boggs is especially concerned with the alleged decline of political discourse because he perceives a world of “social crisis and political decay,” as he calls his second chapter (41-66). Society everywhere is threatened by “a rapidly decaying social infrastructure” (6) and “a host of other social problems – crime, drugs, and education for example” (52). A lengthy discussion warns of impending ecological disaster unless there is political intervention (89-95). It is specifically the contrast between a perception of dire needs and a perception of the decline of traditional political reactions to such needs that fuels Boggs’s concern. If everything in the world were perfectly alright, the decline of politics might even make sense.

Of course, a situation in which the world is “perfectly alright,” or an optimum state of civic affairs, is a matter of perception. I want to suggest that an important reason for the decline of political forms as Boggs understands them is precisely the widespread perception that civic affairs are alright, if not perfectly so then at least enough alright to no longer require the vigorous wielding of traditional political discourse that was designed to address material crises.

I am suggesting that most people in the western democracies of which Boggs despairs are happy enough with the distribution of goods and resources that they have no felt need for political action to change that distribution. We live in an age of optimum entitlements in which enough people feel satisfied enough with what government is doing for them to feel no need for political struggle. The schools are good enough, the economy sound enough even in times of recession, the streets well enough maintained, foreign enemies kept at enough of a distance – and this state of affairs has been going along in this manner for quite some time. There are surely people in western democracies for whom the schools are terrible, the economy inadequate, the streets unlivable, and so forth – but there are relatively speaking not enough of these people, and they are not unhappy enough, to mobilize political action.

Let me say that it will not do to claim that the public ought to be more concerned about the ecology, imperialism, war, and so forth. Although I might well agree with such a stance personally, it is the business of politics to be the terrain on which the mass of ordinary people work out their needs, hopes, and desires – it is not the business of politics to answer to the clarion call of academic elites who want people to bestir themselves even if they are happy enough. I suggest that we are living in a political state of affairs in which many, perhaps most, major issues are *bracketed off* from public discussion and intervention because those issues have crossed a threshold of being “good enough.”

The phenomenon of bracketing off major issues from political struggle is found in every era and in every political arrangement. There has been little or no public, political discussion recently in western democracies as to whether slavery should be legal because that issue was put to rest some time ago: it was bracketed off from discussion. Less extreme issues that have been bracketed off include questions of universal suffrage related to gender or race, questions of the income tax, or of the legality of labor unions. Let me suggest that a lack of public debate over ecological issues, for instance, reflects a widespread (not universal) agreement that economic development is preferable to environmental purity, and that the possibility of future disaster is worth the risk of building and burning at top speed today. If there is indifference to ecological issues it is because an understanding of what to risk and what to tolerate was achieved some time ago and has been bracketed off.

When Boggs complains of a lack of opposition to “the largely taken-for-granted character of deeply entrenched forms of domination” (71), that entrenchment can be understood as an already achieved bracketing of certain major issues; it is not clear at all that calling those issues back onto center stage would change the decision to bracket them. In Boggs there is realization of a recent political trend in the United States which I believe clearly supports this notion of bracketing, and that is “the degree to which differences between Democrats and Republicans have mostly collapsed” (26). I would argue that the Clinton presidency, sacrificing principles for power and expediency, coalesced several trends into today’s settled bracketing of so many major public issues. Boggs acknowledges this in part by referring to Clinton’s welfare reform as a “Reaganesque bill” (53). In fact, it was a Reaganesque presidency, and instrumental in both creating and reflecting our general acceptance of settled, bracketed decisions on major issues. Boggs’s exhortations for people to come out of their political caves and fight fails because not enough people fundamentally disagree about the issues upon which he invites struggle.

A model in which political discourse is about specific, identifiable, “real world” issues is a representational model of discourse (John Stewart, Bill Nichols). Representation is a mode of discourse that is dualist, presuming a set of signs “over here” that refer to objects, events, and actions “over there.” Representational discourse operates on an ethical terrain of truth and falsehood, for its signs may always be judged in terms of whether they accurately represent some state of affairs.

That Boggs’s view of politics is representational, or that most people think of political discourse, indeed any discourse, as representational may seem unsurprising. When he complains that “there is so little public discourse on the main problems of social conflict” (52) Boggs implies a discourse that is about, that represents, the material reality of that conflict. Boggs sees the main function of television news as “reporting” events in the world so that such reports may be taken up into political discourse (82), clearly a representational view. That political discourse should be about, should represent, a world exterior to and apart from it may seem to be patently obvious; for the moment, let me just observe that such an assumption underlies Boggs’s view of politics and discourse.

Of course, representation is also a theory of politics (Boggs, 247): the ability of men and women to represent those who elected them is the key feature of this theory. Power is vested in the people, and is only represented in the actions of legislators, judges, and executives. These people are the public’s “representatives.”

Representation is also a theory of mediation, so basic a theory as to be encoded almost unconsciously, automatically, in many views of how mediation works. The foundational Shannon-Weaver model of communication implies a mediation that represents original thoughts or realities. Mediation, in this view, stands between and connects people. The telephone mediates between two people and what one hears on the instrument is a representation of what the real person says far away. One goes to see films that are representations of something: perhaps of technical processes, perhaps of actors and sets, perhaps of stories once told in novels, and so forth. This representational view of media sees the medium as bringing to the viewer or auditor some signs of something that has happened or that exists elsewhere. Boggs clearly shares a representational view of media. He understands the “technological infrastructure” as constituting a “huge multimedia system” that can lead to “the democratization of knowledge” (267). Media, in this view, present users with signs (pixels on a screen, digitized sounds, and so forth) that convey knowledge about the world, about truths lying beyond the computer, the television screen, or the headphones. Media work when “citizen-empowerment messages get

transmitted in cyberspace” (271), messages that empower because they represent realities, the knowledge of which is to the advantage of citizens who use them.

Politics in today’s large democracies are of necessity mediated. But I want to argue that today’s political discourse is called upon less and less to represent real states of affairs because public concerns over those states of affairs are bracketed off into general acceptance. Hence, mediation is less representational than it used to be, less representational than in Boggs’s formulations. If people engage in political communication today, there is less interest in the role of that communication to represent real affairs if people are relatively satisfied with how those affairs are. But politics as a dimension of humanity must continue in some form, and in large western democracies, must continue in a mediated form. This alternative form of mediation is simulation rather than representation. Thus I will argue that today’s politics is largely played out on a terrain of *simulational* mediation. I will next argue that an understanding of the simulational nature of today’s mediation of political discourse leads to an understanding of politics as *erotic* – that is to say, as grounded in *desire*. This simulational grounding in desire is precisely the reason behind the corporate hegemony that Boggs decries in politics. And finally, I will suggest that when politics today is not grounded in simulational mediation, it is largely personal and *local*.

Politics is Simulational

A simulation is an experience of a set of signs that have no direct reference outside of themselves. If I tell you about a castle I visited, I am using signs to represent a real castle somewhere. But in a video game, the castle I enter is nothing more nor less than a set of signs on a screen which do not refer directly to any real events in any real castle but only to themselves. Two key characteristics define simulations. First, because their constitutive signs are not primarily representational, a simulation is a closed loop into which one enters without direct and immediate reference to a reality (there are definitely indirect, residual, and long term connections to reality; more about this below). Second, because simulations are constructed from signs which are easily renewed, the manipulation of which has few real consequences or costs, simulations are repetitive, repeatable, and recursive: one need only push the reset button on the computer game to have the world reborn afresh (Brummett, *World*).

Much of the public today, bracketing off most political decisions as satisfactory enough, express their political proclivities by entering into the playful terrain of politics as simulation. Boggs is aware of this, although he sees it as precisely the problem, as when he decries the “seductions” of television and computers (271), and the “more artificial forms of public engagement (talk radio, consumer malls, cyberspace, and so forth)” (36). “Artificiality” is of the essence of simulations. Similarly, Boggs discusses the high priest of simulation, Jean Baudrillard, at despairing length (214-15), and Baudrillard’s claims that western cultures are increasingly simulational are the basis for Boggs’s complaints.

Political discourse today is largely a simulational experience. Boggs would seem to agree in identifying public discourse as “less relevant to what is actually happening in the world or to any conceivable policy outcomes,” although he would be unlikely to call the simulational terrain one of “politics” (2). Nevertheless, one can find acknowledgment here and there in Boggs that issues formerly debated on public platforms in the park are now being enacted in simulations. He complains of the 1991 Gulf War becoming a “television

spectacle” (83) – but he does not consider the extent to which Americans may well have been doing politics as they tuned into the video game world that television created out of that conflict. Likewise, he acknowledges that issues of power and freedom might be expressed in dance clubs, but he does not see how such expressions might be political (220).

Instead, Boggs reads the sealed off terrain of simulation as being “enmeshed in private preoccupations (whether excessive television viewing, Web surfing, or ‘shopping ‘til you drop’)” (47). Boggs understands that “American politics” has become “another manifestation of the theatrical spectacle – irrelevant but amusing” (4). He refers to “the shallowness of the political spectacle – of politics as part media culture, part marketing venture, part entertainment” (66). I suggest that the simulational nature of the theater is indeed characteristic of politics today. People watch political talk shows, presidential debates, and political news coverage not with a view to how the signs that comprise those events represent real events elsewhere, but so as to enter a simulational terrain on which the shows, debates, and news are consumed on their own terms and for their own sakes.

I have suggested that representation is a theory of mediation as well as of politics. Similarly, simulation can also be a theory of mediation. I return here to Marshall McLuhan’s early formulation of a medium as “any extension of the self.” Note how much that definition is unconcerned with representation. It invites us to think of a medium as an extension of the terrain of the self, whether physical or psychological. The player of a video game may be understood as extending the self into the game on the screen through the medium of the game and its apparatus. A medium becomes a ground into which one extends the self, often with the expectation of meeting others who have similarly extended their selves. This theory of media accommodates a view of media as a place or apparatus set apart, which is a simulational view.

But we need to complicate our view of simulation as sealed off, for the signs which make up a simulation carry some sort of reference with them, for how else would one recognize the setting for this particular video game as a castle? The reference is indirect, to castles as a type, in general. But an indirect reference or effect can nevertheless be important. A simulation can coach in its participants dispositions and attitudes that have powerful if indirect effects on the conduct of real life. Airplane pilots are trained in simulators precisely so that the skills and habits they acquire in the simulation will carry over into real life; but the carryover must be indirect, since the signs of flight that surround them refer to no immediate reality.

I suggest that simulational politics likewise instills in its participants dispositions and attitudes with powerful but indirect effects on real life. A distinction that will help us to understand this is a distinction between rhetoric and politics with *structural* versus *functional* effects. If a television commercial selling deodorant has a functional effect, it will move an audience to make an immediate, focused decision to purchase that deodorant. But if the advertisement has a structural effect, it will contribute to a long term, sedimented audience predisposition to value a neutral body odor as a sign of good hygiene, and to believe that hygiene in general may be achieved through commodities. Those fundamental predispositions provide a structure within which the specific function of selling a particular brand of deodorant may proceed. Likewise, a political advertisement that urges one to vote for Jones the Republican seeks the functional effect of ushering Jones into office, but it may have the structural effect of reinforcing in an audience the conviction that voting matters, that the election process is legitimate, and that the Republican party is a legitimate choice for voting – all those provide a structural framework within which many electoral choices are situated as functions of the structure.

I suggest that simulational politics is not meant for particular *functional* decisions precisely because so much of politics is bracketed away as generally acceptable. There is little point in passionate argument over the condition of the schools because, in most perceptions, that condition is acceptable enough. Instead, an audience that gets its politics from watching made-for-television movies of the civil rights struggle, or of the difficulties encountered by a lesbian couple, or of a poor family facing layoff, is engaging in a simulational politics that is affecting attitudes and predispositions about race, sexuality, and economics at a *structural* level. In this way simulational politics is indirectly important. Working in a world of bracketed acceptance of most pressing political decisions, simulational politics takes the long view.

Boggs is attuned to a politics that works at a functional level, I believe. He attacks “identity politics” as unable to “give rise to transformations in the class and power relations of society as a whole” (233). But I believe that identity politics, especially worked out in mediated simulations of film and television shows that explore what it means to have identities keyed to race, gender, and so forth, do indeed have an effect precisely at the structural level of class and power relations, if not at the functional level of today’s particular decisions. And while Boggs’s remedies for “reversing the downward spiral” are largely designed to enable a functional politics (255-67), I suggest that we need to be attuned to the possibility of a vigorous structural politics being played out on a mediated simulational terrain.

Politics is Erotic

The subtitle of Boggs’s book, and an ongoing theme in his argument, is corporate power and hegemony. He claims that “traditional civic-mindedness has been subverted by an array of overpowering forces, first and foremost by corporate power” (ix). Boggs argues throughout the book that power is being exercised by corporations rather than by legitimately elected governments. These “giant entities actually begin to constitute a new public sphere of their own” (69). The “corporate agenda...*does* have all the coherence the party system lacks” in our times (28). That corporate agenda is clearly linked to “the mass media itself [which] has become little more than an extension of corporate agendas” (111). Yet I do not believe that Boggs reveals any clear mechanism by which such corporate power is created and maintained, nor how such a mechanism connects to today’s simulational, mediated politics.

I believe that the engine driving corporate success is an *order of desire*, or as Gilles DeLeuze and Felix Guattari, or Herbert Marcuse, would describe it, an *erotic*. Pre-industrial economies were motivated by survival, in most cases: a society’s productive capacity pretty much kept up with what people had to have in order to survive; surpluses were always in peril. Today’s industrial capacity is exponentially beyond need, and must therefore be fueled by desire. Corporate hegemony maintains itself by keeping the public in a constant state of desire. The dominant motive in the public is therefore gratification of pleasure. Boggs is aware of the centrality of that motive as “the pleasure principle,” but he complains of it (129). Let me suggest that it will not do for academics to feel superior to such an order of desire, for if a public chooses to be moved by desire for pleasure rather than by religious fervor or nationalistic jingoism, who are we to judge?

A major site of gratification of pleasure today is entertainment (Gabler, Postman). The ascendance of erotics, of the order of desire, can be seen clearly in public engrossment with film, television, video games, and so forth. Boggs correctly notes corporate domi-

nation in public and private life today, but it will help our understanding to realize that this domination is fueled in large part through a public desire for entertainment. This erotic is then expressed through many if not all dimensions of life. Even purchases of ordinary commodities such as food and clothing become linked to the erotic of entertainment, as shoes are acquired for their resonance with famous athletes, and food may be chosen for its connection with exotic places. Corporations are dominant because they scratch the public itch for entertainment.

The most powerful and most desired entertainments, I suggest, are precisely those conveyed to the public through simulational media. Simulation is strongly influenced by aesthetic values which undergird the satisfaction of desire for pleasure. Especially when considering the mediated nature of simulation, the ability to create an aesthetic environment that seems technically similar to reality is highly valued. Hence, while simulation has always been available to people through novels, plays, and so forth, it is the rapidly rising technical quality of today's simulations that make it such an appealing terrain for all sorts of experiences – including politics. Simulational engrossment is where pleasure is sold to the public today. Even in homes, the two speaker hi fi system of yesterday has given way to total entertainment, surround-sound systems and big screen televisions designed to create simulational experiences.

People will struggle politically over what they want, and they will struggle on the terrains where they feel closest to what they want. Once most fundamental political decisions having to do with material life are bracketed away into acceptability, people enter a simulational terrain. That is what they care about and hence, that is where we should expect political struggles. The fates of nations, characters, and struggles on the entertainment screens, within those simulational worlds, are what engross people now. Whether Bill gets impeached, whether the contestants get off the island, whether racism is overcome on the soap opera is where political struggles now occur. And these issues are worth struggling over not only because that is where people invest their desires now, but because those struggles create effects at a structural level outside, in the material world. Boggs decries a lack of public debate over gun violence even as he observes increasing preoccupation with gun violence on television and in film (147). But I think he misses the fact that it is precisely on the latter, simulated, mediated terrain that political struggle over that and so many other issues is taking place.

Politics is also expressed in what one buys. Very often that is the purchase of entertainment, specifically, the purchase of mediated simulations. Sometimes it is expressed in the purchase of commodities that gratify pleasure. If it becomes “cool to be Black,” and the purchase of signs of African and African-American culture achieve high rank in an erotic, who is to say that the purchase of hip-hop CD's and Fubu clothing is not political expression and struggle?

It is no wonder that both simulational mediation and politics are now governed almost entirely by the same measure, the same denominator, namely the opinion poll. Elections have become but the Poll of Most Importance. The poll is losing its representational importance just as media is becoming less representational, and both are moving toward simulation: the poll results are now what people struggle over politically, they are not a reflection of political struggles happening elsewhere. The extraordinary attunement of politicians, or at least American politicians, to approval ratings (which are publicized regularly) is identical to the Nielsen ratings of the most watched television shows. Political struggle still works, when a president or governor's show is cancelled after only one four year season.

Politics is Local

People do not, of course, live their whole lives on terrains of simulational media. When engaged in direct political action, I think that people are indeed working less and less in traditional political modes and discourses. I am inclined to agree with Boggs's assessment of the decline of the public sphere as traditionally understood. Politics has rushed off of the public platform, in the direction of simulated mediation on one side, but in the direction of the immediate, personal, and local on the other side.

The local and personal manifestation of politics today may well be less than it has been in the past, as reflected in Putnam's analysis of the decline of civic organizations, social clubs, and so forth. But Putnam may also be looking for political, civic engagement in traditional forms and hence miss other local expressions of the political dimension of humanity. I suggest that struggle continues in the micro-local contexts of backyard politics, of neighborly and family relationships, of negotiations over wandering dogs, unkempt lawns, or PTA elections.

What is the rise of gang membership, at least in the United States, over the last few decades but a rise in local political involvement? Unable to affect events at city hall, much less in Washington, the urban, disenfranchised poor may well be expressing their political inclinations in simulational video games on the one hand, and in involvement in local polities of Bloods and Latin Knights on the other hand. If Boggs is looking for politics on a larger scale, he may dismiss these local political terrains as "individual or privatized outlooks" (19), as "privatized retreat" (163), or at best as "micro politics" (209). Boggs is well aware of "an intricate and quasi-underground gang structure" (199), but he sees it only as a sign of "deep alienation" and not as a site of political activity.

In sum, I have suggested here that the reported death of politics may be instead a shift of the natural and indestructible human propensity for politics into the micro-politics of local activity on the one hand, and into the terrain of simulational mediation on the other hand. Let me suggest that this move, much as it may horrify academics, the People of the Book and the Speech, is perfectly consistent with most people's perceptions and desires. Critics may complain of this all they like, may contend that people should be engaging more in traditional political discourses on traditional political terrains. But if these critics want anybody to hear them, ought they not likewise be entertaining people in simulations? Would Boggs and his brethren not reach a wider audience with production of the video game, *Depoliticization: Enter the Public Sphere of Doom?*

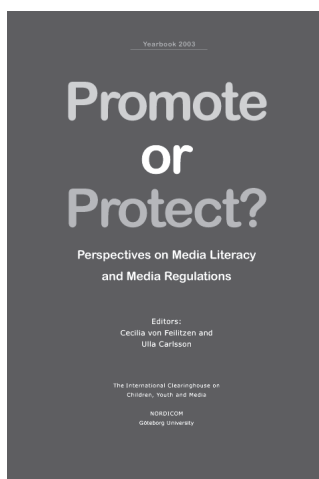
Notes

1. Other scholars, of course, have likewise suggested ways to understand new political practices in an increasingly mediated culture. See Chris Hables Gray and Diana Saco.

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