BOOK REVIEW


INTRODUCTION

True to form, Murray Edelman, the eminent political theorist, writes provocatively again on political language and symbolism. For four decades, Edelman has made substantial contributions to our understanding of political communication. He has distrusted the utterances of politicians and examined their and others' descriptions of governmental and political actions. Rather than accepting public statements, he has penetrated surface meanings of public statements, looking beyond the use of mere recognizable political symbols in language. He has made it fashionable for political scientists (indeed for many scholars) to study language and metaphor, information and cognition, myth and ritual, as a function of the political process and communication within and about it (e.g., Edelman 1964, 1971, 1977).

Throughout his writings, Edelman urges us to maintain a certain skepticism when we observe politics in action. He has insisted that what seems apparent may not be so. Often, political statements are passed off as "objective definitions of issues," but are "nothing more than emotional appeals for public support." Such political communication appeals to people's value while "concealing conflicts of interest and of intent behind words like 'public interest'" (Edelman, 1959, p. 96; cf. Edelman, 1964, p. 137).

He has cautioned that

The student of political process ... makes a serious error if he [or she] takes political perceptions and verbal justifications of political attitudes as fixed entities that predict future behavior and attitude. (1964, p. 186)

In the literature of communication, politics, and psychology (and periodically in history and philosophy) many investigators posit that an act or event perceived by one individual may be perceived differently by another. Explanations for these differing perceptions are usually attributed to persons' predispositions, formulations of beliefs and attitudes rooted in early
familial experience—part of a process scholars term socialization. Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), for example, concluded that voters in the 1940 presidential election selected campaign communication that reinforced their political predispositions. In this sense, each of us constructs reality.

In his latest effort, Constructing the Political Spectacle, Edelman extends his ideas about meanings in political statements while examining the spectacle created by political news, the interpretations generated, and their "implications for democratic theory" (p. 1). He begins with a brief discussion of "premises about politics," especially those related to a conceptual framework borne out of theoretical notions of poststructuralist writers. Edelman's conceptual 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." He concludes by suggesting we can be "emancipated from the mystifications of politics and liberated from a reliance on text or discourse as essential modes for understanding realities" (p. 128).

Most readers will find this book exceptionally interesting. Indeed, it should be required reading for political and literary theoreticians, social scientists, journalists, and philosophers. We feel that Murray Edelman has made a unique and important contribution to the scholarly discussion of mass communication and politics, challenging some of our basic conceptions of the interactions among institutions, the press, and citizens in a democracy.

While we regard Edelman's theoretical beliefs about political communication in America as innovative and insightful, we would draw differently his bleak and often emphatic picture "of the human condition" that renders citizens unable "to protect and promote their own interests ..." (p. 1). We discuss these different "pictures" by considering Edelman's constructions; the deconstruction question itself; and questions about mass media, news, and public opinion.

**EDELMAN'S CONSTRUCTIONS**

A main thread throughout this work is the notion that political discourse/spectacle is only an "interpretation of an interpretation." All political languages are "constructions of reality." By implication, the "facts" are ultimately inaccessible, they are not "objectively" given in political or any other kind of discourse—all is language, i.e., "constructions." Hence to get at meaning, intents, motives(?), it is necessary to deconstruct the discourse, and/or the spectacle. Notwithstanding Edelman's reproach of social scientists who disagree with him (see p. 6), they may avoid his theoretical notions in forming operational definitions of political reality with the argument that such a theory put into practice defies agreement.
Still, despite the initial (and summary) claim that there are no objective facts, "The very concept of 'fact' becomes irrelevant because every meaningful political object and person is an interpretation that reflects and perpetuates an ideology" (p. 10). Throughout his elaboration of theory, Edelman, in constant examples, contrasts the mystifications of the political spectacle to a cited "reality" which seems to prove the illusory construction of political language "about" that reality. For example, he states that Ronald Reagan has misled the country about the effects on the poor of his tax reductions and his cuts in social programs, about the human rights records of foreign governments he supports, and about his administration's responsibility for deficits and for unemployment. (p. 58)

However much this statement reflects the conventional liberal-to-left view of the deceptive practice of the Reagan administration, it is presented, it seems, to describe a factual world which is covered up by political discourse.

Edelman's practice in this book is ambivalent in that he invokes a world outside the mystifying practice of political discourse which seems intended as a correction of political spectacle, or an expose of its falsities. Are statements like the Reagan statement, then, intended as "proof" of his theory, or as brief illustrations of the kind of analysis that could be carried out utilizing his theory?

At times, he cites analytical or historical studies (in footnotes) as support of his statements, but more often he seems to present such statements as though they were self-evident "facts." If all political reality is indeed a construction of language, how can one regard Edelman's statements of apparently self-evident facts as anything other than a further instance of self-interested linguistic construction? Statements like the description of the "reality" behind the mystifications of Reagan's political discourse can only be regarded, then, as mere opinions of the author, since they are unsupported by an extensive analysis. Edelman says that "the notion of reality construction implies that some are valid and others not.... It can be done well or badly and be right or wrong" (pp. 6, 121). But how can the reader judge the validity of statements such as the one about Reagan? Why is Edelman's statement "right" whereas other such statements may be "wrong"? Although Edelman here does not claim to be writing a book of extended analysis, but rather elaborates theory, many of the statements he makes about "reality" remain unpersuasive since they are not accompanied by analytical work which could show why this "opinion" is more valid than any other. If, according to his own theory, Edelman's statements about reality are themselves constructed according to the social/political position and the "interests" of the speaker/observer, there is no reason why a critical reader should regard them as demystifications or deconstructions of political discourse.

In chapter 6, Edelman identifies himself within the poststructuralist "linguistic turn" (p. 103) in philosophy, psychology, and literary theory. However,
without even providing "glosses" of the thought of the poststructuralists he invokes—Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Nelson Goodman, and Paul de Man—Edelman extends the deconstruction/construction perspective about political reality while avoiding a full discussion of alternative perspectives (except as they are dismissed as "conventional views"). This is bothersome since lacking such discussion it is difficult to weigh his theoretical statements.

The reader's acceptance of some of Edelman's cognitive leaps [e.g., from a poststructuralist frame of reference to the inference that political language is more effective "as agencies of lasting and significant change" than are voting and lobbying (p. 130)] may depend upon differentiating deconstruction from other perspectives, a task that Edelman assiduously avoids.

THE DECONSTRUCTION QUESTION

The problem with advancing deconstruction as a tool for discriminating among and within political messages is one of presumed dissemblance. It pretends to take an inaccurate or inappropriate political picture apart and put it back together correctly. Once sorted out, the pieces of the puzzle are there for posterity. Perhaps, but nondeconstructionists may in fact "correct" differently, and some may not see some messages as puzzles to begin with. It is necessary, we feel, to distinguish between, for example, political slogans and editorials or position papers.

The task of determining "fact" or "reality" is not here made easier for the reader who has followed the prevailing discussion of deconstruction by literary theorists, recently jolted by the discovery that the theory's foremost American champion, Paul de Man, authored anti-Semitic essays for a pro-Nazi Belgian publication during the Second World War (see, for example, Lehman, 1988; Hartman, 1988; Heller, 1988). While we hesitate to make generalizations about the theory in light of de Man's apparent earlier ideology, the fact that his work underpins, in part, the argument presented, suggests that the theoretical framework ought to be examined along with the questions raised initially by Edelman:

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? (p. 1)

Edelman's proposition that political spectacle deconstructs itself (pp. 115-119) is troubling when placed toward the end of some 100 pages which have attempted to demonstrate that the construction of problems, leaders, and enemies forms a self-reinforcing system of mystification.
Referring to Derrida and de Man (p. 115), Edelman develops one of his basic notions about language and politics: Political language undermines itself through inversions of value hierarchies, self-negation, and the historical spin of meaning. Here, Edelman constructs further Derrida's "trace" suggesting that the terminology of a discourse may be constructed ambiguously (intending one connotative level of meaning while explicitly signaling another).

The term *deconstruction*, however, refers to an activity performed by the critical analyst; it is not a property of texts. Edelman uses it in a way unwarranted by previous studies, yet never attempts to explain his justification in shifting the received meaning of the term from the frame of conscious performance on the part of a thinker to an autonomous action of discourse itself which is exclusive of its reading by analysts or spectators of the political scene.

Most perplexing in Edelman's attempt to view political language in a landscape filled with construction/deconstruction activities are the roadblocks erected to guide the presumably unaware driver, who, either blinded by dust kicked up by the heavy equipment or confused by posted signs, is unable to navigate a course to the desired destination. Hence, Edelman insists that "... it is not what can be seen that shapes political action and support, but what must be supposed, assumed, or constructed." Considering Edelman's theoretical position, is meaning really a problem? Would not messages deconstruct themselves?

If political spectacle/political discourse ultimately deconstructs itself, exposing its own illusionistic constructions (as Edelman claims), why should it be "mystifying" to spectators of the political scene? Edelman maintains that spectators (the public) are able to "see through" political spectacle enough to recognize it as a play upon public fears and reassurances that the system is "under control" by leaders. In short, the public is not fooled by political discourse, but regards it as a game which does not "really" concern the issues they face in their life-world (*Lebenswelt*). One is justified, then, in asking the question, "Precisely whom does the political spectacle mystify?"

From our reading of Edelman, those who are caught up in the discourse/spectacle, and mystified by it, are those who are foolish enough to take the spectacle seriously—those who are involved in voting, in political discussion groups, plus politicians themselves—and are constructed by the language they inherit (p. 112) and use, by its assumptions, and its rules.

Political history has historically not "maximized well-being," to use Edelman's phrase, but is "a record of the triumph of mystification" (p. 126). Those who work in the political field, Edelman would argue, merely "buttress conventional assumptions," and can affect no real change. But if, as Edelman claims, political spectacle is itself deconstructive, then there is no innate reason why those who practice and view it cannot "liberate" themselves from
any play of this hall of mirrors. If political discourse deconstructs itself, it is not necessarily mystifying, but potentially quite the contrary.

**ALTERNATIVE THEORETICAL “CONSTRUCTIONS”**

Like the earliest scholars of the Frankfurt School (and unlike late Habermas), Edelman’s unapologetically “pessimistic” theory (cf. final chapter) ultimately concedes that those who play the game of political constructions (or, as witnesses, take the spectacle seriously as a discourse about “reality”) are *appropriated* by the language game. They are condemned to become both the subject and the object of mystification, more and more abstracted from the actual pursuit of “well-being” (which Edelman leaves undefined). Although Edelman claims here to expose the illusory nature of the game, he assumes, through most of the book, that others will be mystified by the political spectacle because of its own authentic—often, actually “deceitful”—manipulation of public hopes and fears, *through language* (despite the contradictory claim that this language/spectacle deconstructs itself). In the last chapter, Edelman appears to be arguing that the only way to remain unappropriated by the mystification game is to reject it (don’t vote, don’t engage in political action) in favor of “antidotes” such as *art*.

Edelman assumes (like the early Frankfurt School) that viewers/auditors of the spectacle (here, the political spectacle) have only two choices—they can accept the terms (rules) of the game or reject them. There is no room for *a negotiated reading* of political discourse or the appropriation of political “problems” by individuals to serve their interests—their legitimate well-being as they define it. In this theory, spectators/participants are presented with a crude dualism: accept it all, reject it all.

Ignored in the discussion are the so-called “cultural” studies published during the past decade [e.g., Hall (1980), Morely (1980, 1981), Radway (1984, 1986), Fiske (1986), Giles (1986); cf. two recent studies not available to Edelman: Steiner (1988), and Giles (1989)], which have extended “reception theory” [e.g., Iser (1978), Suleiman and Crosma (1980), Jauss (1982) with an introduction by Paul de Man]. This major theoretical perspective of culture, literary, film and television studies in the United States and Britain rejects the notion of a universally passive appropriation of a text on its own terms (political or otherwise) to explore the actual pragmatics of the act of viewing/reading a “spectacle.” These studies present alternatives to the either/or stance of Edelman. While assuming that any practice of discourse constructs its own illusionary “world” (in Nelson’s terms) and is potentially mystifying, these critics stress the ability and freedom of viewers/auditors and spectators/participants to construct their “own” meanings (like Edel-
man's). This developing body of theory and analysis posits and describes the ability of viewers of the “spectacle” to *negotiate* the meaning of texts—to read and *realize* (Iser's term) meanings which often diverge from the “dominant” readings preferred by the political and media institutions.

**MASS MEDIA NEWS AND PUBLIC OPINION**

While Edelman’s “focus ... is upon people and developments with multiple and changing meanings to one another” (p. 2), he devotes a chapter to “The Ambiguities of Political News,” asserting that, “It is chiefly news reports that stimulate the construction of political spectacles” (p. 90). Edelman's theoretical (more precisely, assumptive) connections among spectacles, mass media, news, and people’s perceptions of political information is summarized as he...

... considers the contributions to ambiguity in political news from some related social phenomena: the conventions of news reporting, the efforts of interest groups to shape what is reported, disparate social conditions, dubious philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality, dominant ideology, and some psychological processes. All of these influence news interpretation substantially, but not in the same way in diverse situations or for different people.

**What News Matters?**

The media decide what is worth reporting. Some people and organizations are accepted as “news sources,” and some kinds of events are assumed to be pregnant with meaning for the general public. There is, in short, a stylized view of what constitutes news: a view that insures the dissemination of many items that have little bearing on future developments or on the quality of life and that preclude dissemination of other stories that have a vital bearing on both. (p. 91)

One “crucial” concept Edelman advances is that “News reports divert attention from immediate experience and help focus it upon a constructed reality” (p. 101). Edelman suggests that news accounts alter people's realities, and often these accounts are of the “unexpected happening” or the “conspicuous personality.” He argues that such events depend either upon an historical context for their appeal to spectators, or one conjured up by spectators themselves. Here again, Edelman advances his belief about events being constructed (perceived and reported by the press, and perceived by spectators) not for clarification (“understandable”), but for mystification. Together news institutions and spectators create “worlds” using language that may “change radically ... meanings attributed to news accounts” (p. 101). [Gans (1979) argues that the news media provide people with a “common fare” that brings about “shared experiences.” He offers “the hypothesis that one journalistic function is to construct nation and society, to put flesh on these otherwise vague concepts, and thus to make them real” (pp. 296-297).]
The concept of public opinion, usually thought of as potentially affecting public policy in a democracy, is not directly part of Edelman's argument. He does talk of the effect of the spectacle on the public (e.g., p. 35), but does not make clear to us the effect of public opinion on the spectacle. Although there may be assorted ways of deducing the "fit" of public opinion—how these "worlds" jell to form it—implicit in the construction/deconstruction doctrine would be its impotence in bringing about political and social change. If, as Edelman argues, direct action voting and lobbying bring short term ephemeral gains (p. 130), does it follow that "indirect action" or public opinion would bring long term gains? We infer otherwise.

Perhaps most disheartening is Edelman's cynical view that political participation is a "narrow focus" on politics, and only reinforces what he criticizes about the polity. Here again, Edelman does not make clear what effect voting turnout would have on "decisive change" were it increased substantially in elections. Edelman seems to be arguing that political language, as now practiced and perceived, lulls voters into satisfaction with the status quo. Voting does not change society and make for better individual well-being. If voters (and presumably non-voters) were cognizant of the "long odds against substantial change" they would "help shape effective strategies" or long-term change. Those strategies, however, would be more effective when "coupled with the recognition that art, science, and culture construct political thought and action rather than simply coexisting with them" (p. 130).

"Reality," as Edelman regards it, is disguised (not described) by language. He concedes that his "... 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 one another" (p. 2). Edelman cautions us to be skeptical about, and be "liberated" from political texts or discourse; to look for "multiple and contradictory realities"; and to examine other discourse, different "social situations and ... historical contexts" (pp. 128-129). But implicit in his discussion is the view that the public lacks the ability to "read" and use a political spectacle in terms of their own interests. Edelman sees the deception of linguistic practice, the fraudulent basis of political constructions, while assuming that all those who are not duped by the system must, like himself, necessarily reject it. Between these two poles lies a whole world of "negotiated" political interaction which struggles for truth within self-interest—but the terms are not mutually exclusive.

Edelman concludes:

Decisive change requires struggle based on hope, but even struggle that disrupts established institutions, routines, and assumptions has not been effective for long. Analyses of the nature and consequences of the spectacle of politics is itself a part of the ongoing struggle.

Given the conventional view of democratic theory, of an informed citizenry, the reader of Edelman's view of political communication may struggle
like the musical King of Siam, who, in the process of learning the English language and Western culture, becomes exasperated and chants:

There are times I almost think I am not sure of what I absolutely know. Very often find confusion in conclusion I concluded long ago. In my head are so many facts that as a student I have studied to procure. In my head are many facts of which I wish I was more certain I was sure ... Is a puzzlement!

REFERENCES


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