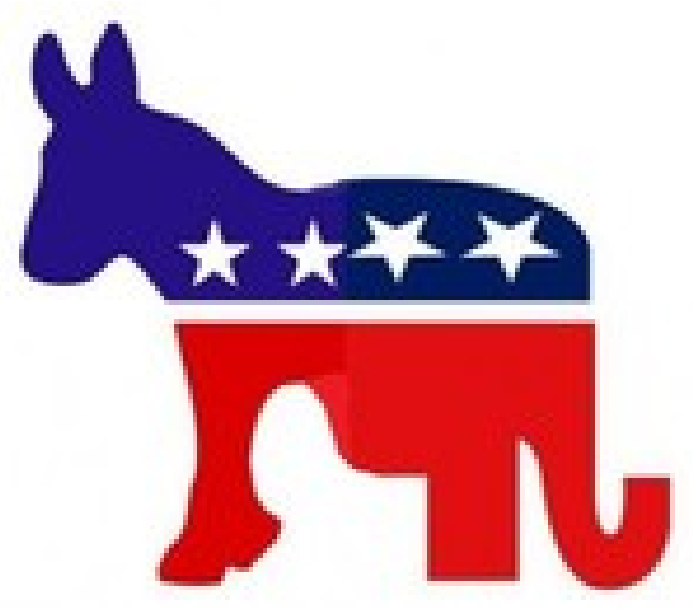
THE POLITICS OF IMAGINED OPINION

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By Prof. James Tracy, Global Research, March 12, 2013

Where do you locate yourself on the political spectrum? Are you liberal or conservative? On "the left", "the right", or perhaps you're a bit of both ("moderate"). It is no secret that American mass culture often blunts the capacity for civic engagement and political awareness. Yet those who pursue an identity in acceptable political dialogue are less aware of how the parameters of American politics have been carefully crafted to elicit vicarious and seemingly meaningful participation for the politically inclined.

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This is at least partially because political elites have for close to a century carefully crafted and presided over a political universe of smoke and mirrors for their subjects; one where citizens think and act as if they have political choices and agency, thereby perpetuating the myth of democratic participation and enfranchisement. Thinking along these lines is apparent in the almost century-old writings of the well-known American political commentator Walter Lippmann.

Lippmann's many observations on media and public opinion are significant not just because he was a distinctly influential and gifted commentator, but also because of his many close working relationships and affinities with the most powerful financial and political elites of his day. In fact, historian Carroll Quigley recognizes Lippmann as "the authentic spokesman in American journalism for the Establishments on both sides of the Atlantic in international affairs."

As World War One concluded, Lippmann played a central role in recruiting intellectual talent for "the Inquiry," a group of several dozen analysts set up by the Wilson administration and powerful Wall Street bankers and oil barons to ostensibly establish plans for a peace settlement, what eventually crystallized as Wilson's Fourteen Points and a transnational system of governance called the League of Nations most Americans rejected. In reality, the Inquiry was a philosophical and functional precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency, gathering, analyzing, and producing recommendations on how the bankers and oil men should proceed with maintenance of their overseas assets in a vastly rearranged geopolitical environment.

In the years following the Inquiry's dissolution Lippmann wrote his most well-known work, *Public Opinion*, where he lamented the US public's rejection of an international government and expounded on how the thinking and behavior of modern individuals are largely determined through prejudice, or "stereotypes", thus rendering citizens unfit for meaningful participation in public affairs.

"For the most part we do not first see, and then define," he famously wrote, "we define first and then see." And, acknowledging the growing power and political implications of electronic mass media, Lippmann marveled at how "on the screen the whole process of observing, describing, reporting, and then imagining, has been accomplished for you."

Along these lines Lippmann envisioned how political persuasions may be ready-made to develop a seeming relationship with political iconography and sloganeering where positions, sensibilities, and identification with an imagined community all take place through televisual displacement and atomization. With the media's major control over representation and imagination comes the power to exclude undesirable political objects and ideas, thereby rendering them for all practical purposes out-of-mind.

The stereotypical dynamic and ideal endures in the binary oppositions governing much of what passes for American political discourse today: liberal/conservative, Democratic/Republican, Red/Blue, pro-choice/pro-life, Tea Party/Occupy, and so on. Far removed from the union hall, tavern, or country club where political opinions derived from lived interaction and experience, defining subjective opinion through imagined political adversaries with malevolent ulterior motives is now typically carried out in mass mediated form that provides one with their own sense of purpose and moral rectitude. It is also a perfectly suitable technique for a mechanized and streamlined journalism that has little time or resources for fathoming and assessing the nuanced complexity and broader possibilities inherent in all genuine political thinking. As political theorist Sheldon Wolin remarks, "The responsibility of the responsible media include maintaining an ideological 'balance' that treats the "Left" and the "Right" as polar opposites as well as moral and political equivalents." Manufactured political opinion also become deeply ingrained in the public mind through shared cultural figures and artifacts.

In one of the most well-known situation comedies in American television history, *All in the Family,* Archie Bunker was an archetype that forever unified bigotry and pettiness with conservatism in the popular mind. Archie's childish persona acted synergistically alongside the enlightened and educated liberalism of Michael Stivic. The Bunker/Stivic binary, echoed to the present in the jousting punditry of cable news, remains a template for locating ones imagined place on the political spectrum.

Stereotypes and imagined positions are the exact opposite of what perceptive minds capable of discerning controversies and problems would expect and desire from political exchange. Above the din of clashing ideologies the very same forces Walter Lippmann moved with and spoke for remain, apart from and unimaginable in the prisonhouse of political opinion they helped design and construct.

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