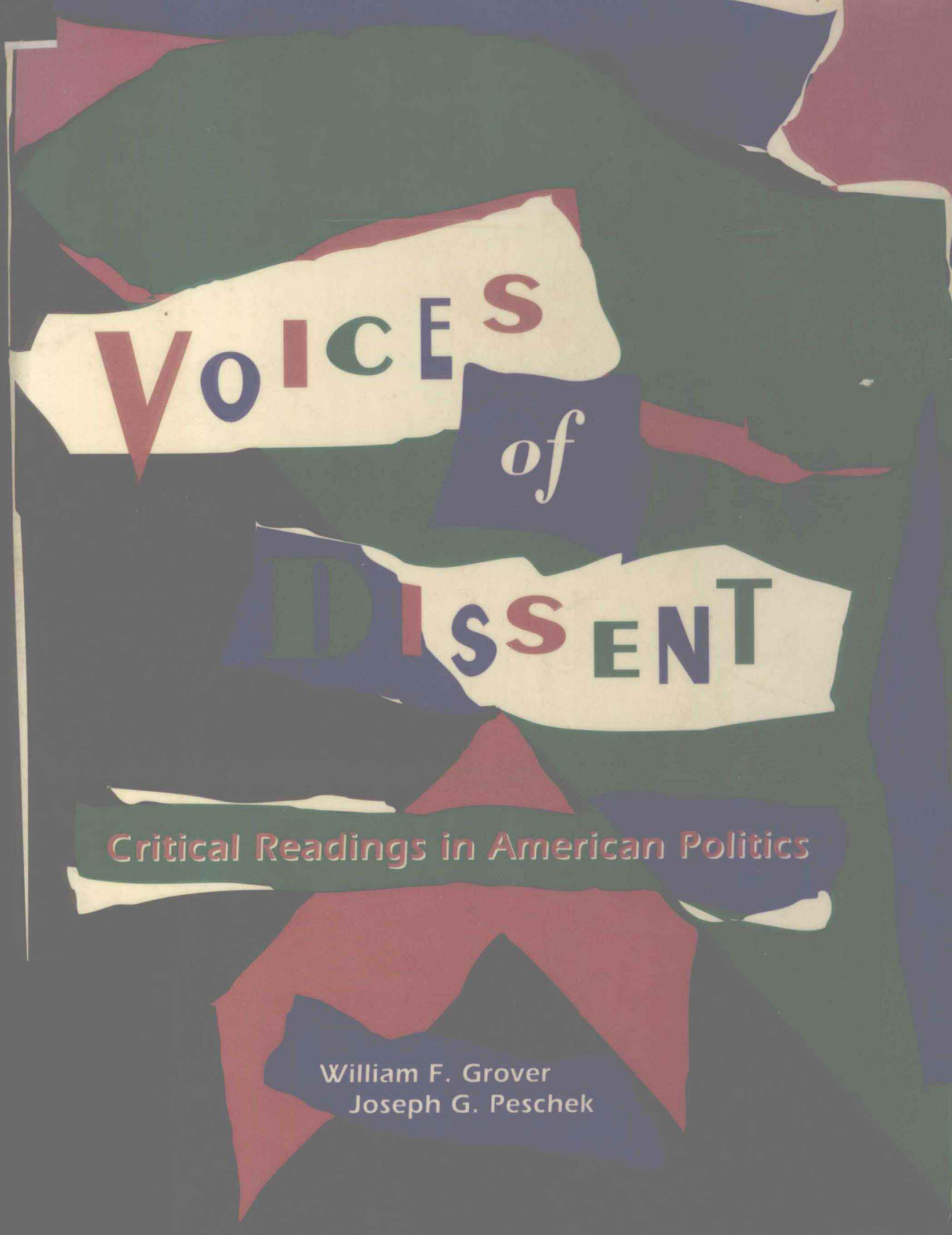
VOICES
of
DISSENT
Critical Readings in American Politics
William F. Grover
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Voices of Dissent

Critical Readings in American Politics

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For our students

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Preface

Many readers in American politics are currently available. What makes this one different? *Voices of Dissent* is the *only* reader on the market that fundamentally challenges the political and economic status quo in America. It provides a systematic series of critical perspectives on American politics that goes beyond the range of debate between mainstream liberalism and conservatism. In developing this book we drew on some of the best examples of a diverse and energizing body of critical scholarship that is all too often overlooked in government courses. Political economy, and the tension between capitalism and democracy, is a recurrent theme in the selections. Other articles explore the ideological effects of the mass media, the ecological results of uncontrolled economic growth, and the dynamics of class, race, and gender divisions in the United States—issues central to our political life as we move toward the twenty-first century. American governmental institutions and electoral processes are treated in four central chapters, but only after they are placed in the context of underlying economic and social structures, as well as the more apparent constitutional arrangements, that shape their design and impact.

Our goal is to provide students with the intellectual tools to develop a sustained and integrated critique of the workings of U.S. democracy, so that they can better contribute, as citizens, to a broader debate about the American future. We firmly believe that students today are open to a critical analysis of their political system and are eager to participate in a discussion of fresh alternatives. We also think that many instructors are interested in exposing their students, and themselves, to material that makes sense of the dissatisfaction with the status quo that registers daily as America moves through the 1990s. Our book provides a set of readings to help accomplish these goals.

Voices of Dissent is designed for introductory college-level courses in American government. It could be used as a supplement to a variety of textbooks, or in conjunction with several works that have a narrower focus. In our experience some of the best opportunities for learning occur when alternative frameworks of analysis and explanation are matched against each other. For that reason the pairing of our reader with a work that adopts a more conventional, or even sharply opposed, interpretation of American politics might prove quite stimulating.

ORGANIZATION

We begin with a general introduction. Here we explain the intellectual and political orientation that shaped our selection of readings and contrast our outlook with what

we call mainstream political science. The readings that follow are grouped into three sections. Part I looks at the broad structures that constrain and pattern American politics. The three chapters in this section look at political economy, ideology and culture, and the distinctive nature of the American state. Part II attends to the traditional subject matter of American government: Congress, the presidency, law and the courts, and parties and elections. Many of the articles in this section are notable for relating institutions to the broader level of political analysis developed in Part I. Part III examines major policy challenges facing the United States and then, in a unique feature, asks students to confront the implications of the previous eight chapters for their responsibility as citizens.

FEATURES

Voices of Dissent contains several features that make it an attractive and original resource. Our emphasis on the contextual centrality of corporate capitalism and individualist values should deepen students' understanding of the very meaning of politics. Chapter introductions relate selections to key political questions and overall themes of the book. Each chapter begins with a theoretical or conceptually oriented piece that identifies underlying issues relevant to the unconventional view of American politics this reader has been designed to encourage. Our 39 selections represent some of the best and most provocative writing on American politics—scholarly and journalistic—available today. Finally, our stress on the development of a critical perspective, and on the need for responsibility and political action, make this a reader that is both different and, perhaps, makes a difference.

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WILLIAM F. GROVER
JOSEPH G. PESCHEK

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Introduction: Why a *Critical* Reader?

> A long habit of not thinking a thing *wrong*, gives it a superficial appearance of being *right*. . . .
>
> —Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

In January of 1776, Thomas Paine gave voice to the growing aspirations of Americans for freedom and independence with his radical call to end the monarchical rule of the British Empire. His pamphlet *Common Sense* was a phenomenal success, with upwards of 150,000 copies printed, an unheard of number for his day.[1] Paine's straightforward message found a receptive audience among ordinary people, whose often inchoate opposition to the King was impeded by entrenched deference to royal authority. With fiery reasoning in support of dissent and republican government, he cut through the haze of "what was" and crystallized a vision of "what could be."

As introductory students of politics, the lessons of eighteenth-century America may seem like ancient history to you. Today's revolutions in political thinking seem to be occurring elsewhere. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the breakup of Eastern Europe as a Soviet satellite, the coordination into a single market of the economies of the European Community nations, and the demise of the USSR and Soviet-style Communism, historic world events have swept away the political, economic, military, and ideological basis of the cold war, and with it much of what we have known in the post–World War II period as foreign affairs. In the wake of these breathtakingly rapid transformations—punctuated by the crude and hollow triumphalism of both the U.S. invasion of Panama and the Gulf War "victory"—we have been treated to the predictable chorus of political pundits and "experts" in the mass media reassuring us that recent history confirms the universal appeal and unquestionable rightness of American versions of democracy and corporate capitalism. The tide of history is going our way, we are told. Why swim against it?

With this political and cultural backdrop, the need for a critical reader in American politics may seem less than compelling to you. Indeed, the need for posing alternatives to the status quo may appear nonexistent. We strongly believe, however,

[1]For a lively discussion of the role of Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* in galvanizing the revolutionary spirit in America, see Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), chapter 4.

that the American political system today has a superficial appearance of rightness, a veneer of public ritual and familiarity beneath which lies tremendous private (and occasionally public) discontent. Moreover, we think the 1980s' infatuation with conservatism has waned, and students and teachers are interested in a challenging analysis of American politics—including alternatives to conventional liberal and conservative approaches that, we are all taught, mark the limits of "legitimate" debate. In this text we ask you to move beyond these socialized limits.

The 1990s have ushered in a period of stunning change, and with it have come both the dark possibilities and bright opportunities that mark all periods of crisis and transition. At the same time, the list of pressing problems facing the United States—indeed, the world—remains long, and finding real solutions that transcend patriotic rhetoric, cynical presidential promises, nationalistic hubris, and 10-second sound bites necessarily will involve a broadening of political debate. Specific issues here at home are troubling enough, among them: the declining standard of living of working- and middle-class Americans that intensified during the Reagan-Bush era; the crisis of environmental degradation, which is reaching potentially cataclysmic proportions globally; the burgeoning financial crisis that includes, but is not limited to, the savings and loan debacle; the well-documented inadequacies of the educational system of the United States, which is second to many others worldwide; the health-care crunch that has left 35 million Americans without any medical coverage; epidemic crime rates; and the persistence of poverty, racism, and sexism as barriers to basic equality. Perhaps more troubling still is the underlying cancerous trend of popular nonparticipation in the political process due to widespread apathy and lack of confidence people have in their political leaders and institutions. Most Americans barely can bring themselves to go to the polls every four years to select a president, let alone play a greater role as full citizens. They have, in effect, given up on politics.

These and a host of other problems confront the student of politics. In the face of such formidable dilemmas, you are left with a few possible responses. One common response is resignation, expressed in such adages as "you can't fight city hall," and "don't rock the boat." Many students tell us they can see basic injustices, but feel powerless to change them. The durability of this view is ironic, though, given the sweeping and rapid changes we have seen in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Another response available to you is the *pluralist* interpretation of political life, which encourages piecemeal problem-solving and an incremental view of change. Closely linked to an inherited cultural assumption about politics and power, the pluralist model of politics dominates contemporary political science. Pluralism rests on the view of society as a collection of groups that compete over various policy areas. Through these groups, or acting as individuals through other democratic freedoms such as voting rights, representative institutions, and civil liberties, people can negotiate and compromise in an open political process. Group conflict is considered fair as long as the government serves as an unbiased umpire, maintaining a level playing field for all groups. Power is said to be diffuse; no one group has unfair advantages. When necessary, reforms occur as groups succeed (or fail) in having their ideas triumph over competing ideas. And the end result of this pluralist interaction is understood to reasonably approximate "the public interest." On a pluralist reading of politics, the system may have flaws, but none so fatal that the system itself is called into question.

The pluralist understanding of American politics is a relatively comfortable one. It allows students to retain the belief that the political process is open enough, and sufficiently fluid, to adapt to virtually any contingency without changing the basic power relations of the political economy. Moreover, pluralists define "politics" narrowly—as what *government* does—so the model overlooks other arenas of power, among them corporate capital.

We contend that neither resignation nor pluralist incrementalism will help you make sense of the American political landscape. A third, more critical, approach is warranted, one that challenges existing power relations. As currently practiced, politics speaks largely to the concerns of the wealthy and influential. The political system does not offer the hope of a better life for most Americans, but rather leaves unquestioned a structure of power and privilege that endures regardless of which party controls Congress and the White House.

Our anthology seeks to contribute to the emerging discussion about the need to rethink and broaden the range of political and economic options facing the country. For many of you this may be your first exposure to dissenting political orientations, which are marginalized, or rendered invisible, in the mass media and most college textbooks. Within political science, the field of American politics is awash in textbooks and readers that assume an orthodox pluralist perspective, or provide a small sampling of differing viewpoints (though uniformly still heavily weighted toward the mainstream) on a series of issues of the day. Against this current, we adopt a critical stance which challenges conventional self-congratulatory accounts of the American political system. We draw articles from the rich literature of radical scholarship, along with selected mainstream pieces that add texture to the more critical interpretation.

The book is divided into three sections. Part I examines the structure underlying political life, a structure that profoundly shapes and constrains the political choices available to us. The chapters in this section emphasize the interconnections between the political economy, ideological and cultural beliefs, and the structure of the state. Part II considers the "nuts and bolts" of political institutions and processes. Its four chapters closely parallel material found in almost all introductory textbooks and readers, albeit from a direction that contributes to a critical understanding of the political status quo by situating those institutions within the deeper structure outlined in Part I. Part III moves beyond the institutions to explore where the nation is heading, and where it *should* be heading: politics and *vision*, if you will. Selected foreign and domestic policy challenges are explored, and then we ask you to ponder the implications of the foregoing analysis for your own life as a responsible citizen. Finally, we have included in an appendix three classic political documents whose importance must be considered in any alternative analysis.

While there are many ways to use our reader in introductory courses, we believe it may be most useful as an analytic complement to any of the myriad conventional textbooks on the market. Through the competition of ideas you will develop your capacity to think freely and critically. Our alternative perspective—which questions the very roots of political, economic, and ideological power in the United States—grows out of a positive belief that the current distribution of power and resources seriously impedes freedom, equality, and democracy in the fullest sense of these terms. As proponents of real political participation and social justice, we critique the system in order to improve it when possible, and change it when necessary.

With these thoughts in mind, we frankly hope our reader will make you feel uncomfortable, shake you up a bit, and ultimately stimulate you to ask deep questions about the American political and economic system. Our goal in this sense is a radical one. A nation is not a healthy democracy simply because its politicians, corporate leaders, and the mass media constantly say it is, or because other forms of more authoritarian control are tumbling down worldwide. A healthy polity can thrive only when ordinary people have meaningful control over the decisions that directly affect their lives. Democracy in the best sense should provide the societal context within which people's "instinct for freedom" can flourish, as Noam Chomsky has written in *Language and Politics:*

> I would like to believe that people have an instinct for freedom, that they really want to control their own affairs. They don't want to be pushed around, ordered, oppressed, etc., and they want a chance to do things that make sense, like constructive work in a way that they control, or maybe control together with others. I don't know any way to prove this. It's really a hope about what human beings are like—a hope that if social structures change sufficiently, those aspects of human nature will be realized.[2]

We share this hope, a hope that is animated by a spirit Paine would have appreciated. Its realization—and the empowerment that would accompany it—is what informed, truly democratic citizenship is supposed to be about. We welcome feedback from students and teachers so we may learn whether this reader has helped you develop the analytic skills necessary to bring this hope closer to fruition.

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[2]Noam Chomsky, *Language and Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1988), p. 756.

PART I:

STRUCTURE

If the foundation of your house is cracked and starting to weaken, it makes little sense to address the problem by applying a fresh coat of paint that would merely conceal the underlying reality of decay. In our view, the American political system is a lot like a house with an unstable foundation. While the possibility of collapse certainly is not imminent, the structure of the American political economy, and the ideology that sustains it, is showing signs of severe stress. Moreover, this structure belies the cherished pluralist assumption (discussed in the Introduction) that our political system is one of open, fluid competition among groups. The inherent structural advantages, and disadvantages, accorded various groups significantly bias the political and economic system toward the interests of those who wield great power.

At the outset we must acknowledge that the concept of *structure* is itself quite muddled. Mainstream political scientists often use the term "structure" in a shallow sense when discussing the institutions of government, thus equating structure with the formal machinery of politics. This reduces structure to the institutional balance of power between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. While these institutional interactions obviously merit our attention, the structure-as-institutions approach ignores the deeper structure of power within which institutions operate.

In Part I we explore this deep structure of American politics, with three chapters focusing on the primary structural components of political economy, ideology, and state-constitutional arrangements. Taken as a whole they challenge you to consider whether the tensions inherent in the relationship between democracy as a political concept, and capitalism as a form of economic organization, may in fact constitute a *problem* for the nation, not the solution to our problems, as we are socialized to believe. Are capitalism and a meaningful degree of democracy really compatible, or is capitalist democracy an oxymoron? Does our political culture enable us to consider carefully a wide range of alternative policy directions in the United States? If not, are we as "free" as we like to think? Why is the power of the state so closely connected to the private power of large economic entities? Does the U.S. Constitution strengthen this connection, or provide ways to challenge it? These and many other troubling questions flow from a close reading of the selections in Part I.

Together these three structural components form the basic context—the playing field—within which political institutions operate. Understanding this structure will help you make sense of what government institutions do, and why problems so often seem to persist regardless of what policies are pursued in Washington. And it will help you come to grips with the pressures that impinge upon the foundations of American politics as a new century approaches.

Chapter 1
Political Economy

Politics is much more than government. Underlying this book of readings is the conviction that politics involves all relationships of power, whether they be economic, social, or cultural, as well as the interrelationship of government institutions. In their accounts of American politics, many political scientists focus on the Constitution and the three branches of government it established more than 200 years ago. We include these traditional subjects, but place them in a broader context that, in our view, will help you to understand better their actual workings and significance. Given our approach, it should not seem strange that we begin a book on American politics with what appears to be an economic focus.

Our first set of readings emphasizes the closely interwoven connection between politics and economics and the importance of understanding our capitalist system if we are to understand our politics. In the late eighteenth century, political economy was a commonsense way of thinking for Alexander Hamilton and other Founding Fathers, as we will see in Chapter Three. But in the twentieth century the study of economics and politics became institutionally separated in American colleges and in academic discourse more generally. In recent years this conceptual chasm has been challenged from a variety of perspectives. The selections in this chapter represent a revival of a broader, integrated analysis of American politics that challenges us to think critically about the relationship of capitalism and democracy.

Edward Greenberg, a political scientist, discusses the public impact of private economic power, describing how the large corporations that dominate the U.S. economy in many ways determine the quality of life for Americans. Corporations, in effect, are acting as private governments, but without accountability to the public. Greenberg is unimpressed by the argument that modern corporate managers act in a more public-spirited way than owner-run firms. Private profit remains the bottom line. Charles Lindblom, also a political scientist, was long associated with the pluralist approach, which saw political power as broadly dispersed and balanced among an array of competing interest groups. But in his 1977 book *Politics and Markets*, Lindblom argued that business occupies a "privileged position" in the political systems of market societies. Lindblom's "The Market As Prison" (1982) summarizes many themes from his book and contends that markets function to "punish" public policymakers when they attempt to make changes unwelcome to the business community. Both Greenberg and Lindblom suggest that the private control of investment, which is basic to capitalism, has profound public impacts and undermines a democratic formation of the common good by withdrawing crucial decisions from popular deliberation.

G. William Domhoff, a sociologist who has written many important books on power in America, defends the view that a wealthy, ruling upper class maintains the social structure from which it benefits through its institutionally based leadership group, called the "power elite." Domhoff is interested in demonstrating the actual processes used by the power elite to shape government policy regardless of the party in power. He finds a network of institutions, especially "policy-discussion groups," that are financed and directed by the power elite and that play a central role in providing policy suggestions and personnel to the government. In this essay he shows that the experts appointed to the President's Council of Economic Advisers are very likely to have been associated with the institutions of the power elite. Domhoff's case study nicely illustrates how economic and social power is translated into political influence, and underscores the need to examine institutions that are formally outside the government, such as policy groups and think tanks, if we are to grasp the real nature of our politics.

Murray Bookchin, a social theorist and longtime environmental activist, addresses the root causes of the ecological crisis. Writing in the aftermath of the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Alaska, Bookchin goes beyond the symptoms of environmental degradation and points to the inherently antiecological nature of our capitalist society. Our way of life is premised on an uncontrollable form of growth driven by the competitive imperatives of the market economy. It follows from Bookchin's diagnosis that ecological devastation cannot be prevented by changes in individual behavior and lifestyle alone. We must transform our economy and society and rethink our very idea of progress as well. All of the authors in this chapter should help you to see politics as much broader than what goes on in government, and as powerfully shaped and constrained by the dynamics of our economy. When this is understood it is difficult to be satisfied with a definition of democracy confined to the presence of elections and formal rights.

1.

CORPORATE POWER AND DEMOCRACY

EDWARD S. GREENBERG

Corporate power is of more than academic interest. Such concentrated power has wrought a profound transformation in the American economy, a transformation that deeply affects the quality of life of the American people and the degree of control they are able to exercise over their destinies. Since the formation of the great trusts of the late nineteenth century, the division of the American economy has gradually evolved into two distinct segments—one competitive and of declining importance, the other monopolistic and dominant in the domestic economy.

The appearance of this concentrated and by-now-dominant sector in the economy represents a remarkable change, not only in the organization of capitalism but in the degree to which private business decisions affect the public well-being. The direction of economic life today is no longer the product of millions of transactions among thousands of firms operating through an impersonal marketplace. Rather, the main directions of economic life, and thus of social life in general, are a product of the planning processes of the great corporate firms and rest in the hands of a relatively few people who sit in executive offices and boardrooms. Decisions made by the executives and owners of the great corporations have more direct and lasting effects upon the quality of life of Americans than decisions reached by any other set of decision makers (including government officials), and in rendering these decisions, many of which have socially irrational and harmful effects, they are responsible to no one but themselves and their stockholders.

Source: *From* The American Political System: A Radical Approach, *Fifth Edition, by Edward S. Greenberg, pages 126–133.*

I do not mean to imply that corporations act immorally or illegally in these or other matters. I am only suggesting that in the course of their everyday business activities, because of their size and concentration, corporations shape and alter the world around them, with profound effects on the population. Government responds *ex post facto* to the problems generated by corporate action: the corporations act, and government deals with the consequences of those actions as best it can. A few examples might help to illuminate this point.

It is normal, legal, and rational business behavior for corporate managers to attempt to maximize their return on investment, even if local employment suffers as a result. The shoe and textile industries have largely abandoned the New England states for the South, where antiunion sentiment has kept wages low, while steel firms have been closing their gates all over the upper Midwest. Rather than build new steel plants or modernize their operations, steel firms have become heavily engaged in acquiring other corporations. Thus, U.S. Steel spent $6 billion to acquire Marathon Oil. Other corporations are accelerating the trend to transfer manufacturing processes to places like South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia, where wages are even lower and regulations are nonexistent, thus exporting significant numbers of jobs.

It is not unusual for a corporation to deplete and close one of its divisions or new acquisitions (thereby increasing unemployment) in order to use its liquid assets to finance further acquisitions. In 1977, the profitable Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company announced its closing, resulting in the immediate loss of 5,000 jobs in that already depressed section of Ohio. The company closed after its parent company, Lykes Brothers, Inc., used its treasury to finance further acquisitions. As *Business Week* put it, "The conglomerateur's steel acquisitions were seen as cash boxes for corporate growth in other areas."

These examples are symptomatic of general trends in the behavior of American corporations, which have been systematically exporting capital, manufacturing facilities, and manufacturing jobs since the early 1970s. They have done so in an effort, rational for the corporation but not necessarily for the American economy, to maximize short-term profit margins, a form of managerial behavior that is much admired and highly rewarded in the business world. When not exporting investments, American corporations have increasingly engaged in what some have called "asset rearrangement" and in real estate speculation. They have not been willing, on the other hand, to channel very much of their capital into the formation of new plant and equipment. The result has been a virtual collapse in the growth of American productivity and a significant and escalating loss of world markets to other nations, particularly Japan. One student of the American auto industry tells a story that vividly demonstrates how American corporations, interested in short-term profit maximization, reward irrational managerial behavior:

> At one time, the assembly plant in Tarrytown, New York, year in and year out, produced the poorest quality cars of all 22 GM U.S. car assembly plants. In some instances, Tarrytown cars were so poorly built, the dealers refused to accept them. At the same time, it had the lowest manufacturing costs in General Motors. So the Tarrytown plant manager was getting one of the biggest bonuses of all the assembly-plant managers while building the worst cars in the company.

It is hardly surprising that, while the American auto industry remains profitable, it steadily loses domestic and international markets to the Europeans and the Japanese.

The modern corporation has assumed a form so large, concentrated, and interlocked with other giant enterprises that its every act has consequences for human populations far beyond its own walls. Government finds that it can at best act *ex post facto*, or, more commonly, that attempts to regulate the consequences of corporate decision making are beyond its capacity.