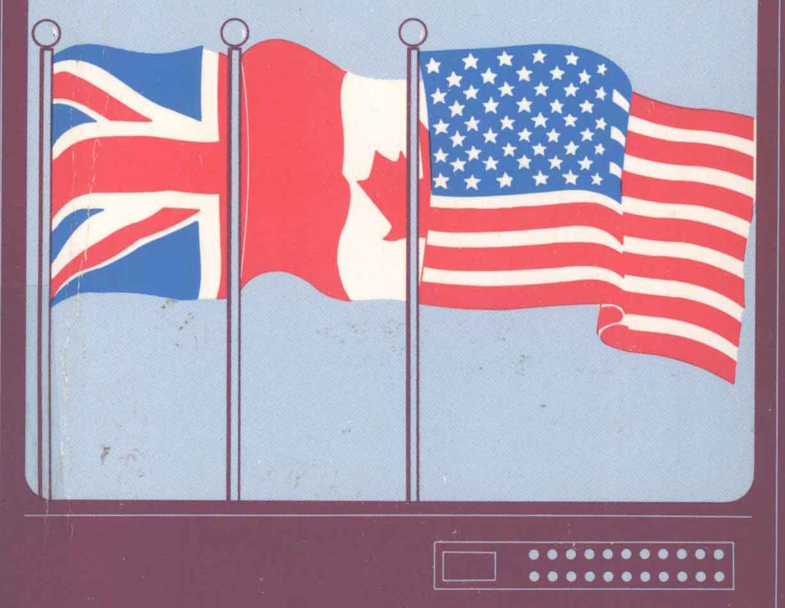
Culture and Politics in
Britain, Canada, and
the United States

PARTIAL VISIONS

Richard M. Merelman



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Preface

The question of culture's role in politics arose as early as Plato's decision to expel poets from his Republic. But, despite Plato, today's poets—the wordsmiths and image makers of popular culture—occupy positions of great power in democratic societies. I argue in this book that Britain, Canada, and the United States have spawned cultural visions which tend to frustrate the realization of democracy. I therefore call these visions *partial.* These partial visions are contained in forms of popular culture: television situation comedies, magazine advertisements, social studies texts, and corporate publications. As an ensemble, popular culture constitutes collective representations of two basic relations in liberal democratic discourse: the relations of public to private and of the collectivity to the individual. These partial visions are paradoxes: indispensable, yet incomplete; revelatory, yet distorted; idealized, yet inequitable. Ultimately, however, these visions hinder public opinion and political debate from accomplishing the democratic project.

Chapter 1 of this study describes how political institutions and histories in Britain, Canada, and the United States provide distinctive matrices for cultural development, and how these matrices shape "conflictive democratic participation," an indispensable feature of modern democracy. Chapter 2 utilizes symbolic anthropology to conceptualize forms of popular culture as narratives of liberal democracy. Chapters 3 through 5 describe the partial visions of liberal democracy in American, Canadian, and British popular culture. Chapter 6 describes the way public opinion and political debate in Britain, Canada, and the United States reflect and project these partial visions. Chapter 7 discusses the implications of this study for issues of change, meaning, and power in liberal democracies.

The narratives of popular culture frame politics in liberal democracies, just as surely as the Catholic mass frames the Church spiritual and temporal, or ritualized cargo systems frame life among the Zinacantan Indians of Mexico (Kertzer 1988: 57). The reader should therefore be under no illusions: because they are *partial*, the cultural visions of liberal democratic politics in Britain, Canada, and the United States ultimately must alter if democracy is fully to flower.

Acknowledgments

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Magda Ghanima, then of the University of Maryland, helped me as a research assistant to get the project up and running. Finessa Ferrell-Smith served as my project assistant in Madison and ably laid the foundation for chapter 6. Merely listening to her Oklahoma twang pitting itself over the phone against the BBC English of secretaries in London was worth the price of admission. Melanie Grant in London taped many of the British television programs I rely upon; Glen Luff of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Toronto, and Fred Headon of the Canadian Association for the Social Studies helped me secure Canadian materials. Phyllis Miller deserves a special place in heaven for deciphering my mysterious hieroglyphic amalgam of typed manuscript and handwritten revisions, entering this script on the appropriate floppy discs, and giving me back beautiful copy. All this she did quickly, with good humor, and much patience for the vagaries of quixotic scholarship.

Judith Tuttle of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Memorial Library benignly evaded the call of duty in permitting me flexibility in the use of library materials. I have vexed Judy for years, and I hope I don't get her into trouble by thanking her publicly.

Many students, friends, and colleagues risked their health by reading an earlier, quite heavy, version of the manuscript. They provided me the ideal body of feedback, unsparing, yet kindly. These unindicted co-conspirators are: Peter Eisinger, Murray Edelman, Gina Sapiro, Paula Mohan, Fred Greenstein, Bill Gormley, Eric Gorham, Leon Epstein, and Dan Levin. They are, of course, absolved from what follows.

I want particularly to express my gratitude to Crawford Young, not only for his exemplary reading, but also for his unflappable optimism about this project. I only hope Crawford's optimism wasn't founded on the fact that I had written the thing, and not he. Barbara Hanrahan,

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of the University of Wisconsin Press, was similarly a bulwark during a long period of review.

Part of chapter 3 appeared as "Sitcoms and Citicorp: On the Cultural Construction of American Liberalism," *Journal of American Culture* (Spring, 1987): 41–56; much of chapter 2 and a small bit of chapter 7 appeared as "On Culture and Politics in the United States: A Perspective from Structural Anthropology," *British Journal of Political Science* (October, 1989): 465–93. Both pieces have been somewhat rewritten for this study.

Mere words cannot do justice to the feelings which only she to whom this book is lovingly dedicated elicits.

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Partial Visions

CHAPTER ONE

Three Liberal Democratic Cultures

Introduction: Democratic Possibilities and Group Conflict

However else one may characterize it, democracy surely implies some form of popular rule. And popular rule requires widespread popular participation in politics (Pennock and Chapman 1975). Whether through direct action or through a process of representation, a public must help determine its political fate if that public is to enjoy democratic empowerment. Partly because the root meaning of *democracy* is "popular rule," as democracy has spread, its promises of popular rule have embraced ever-larger categories of persons. For example, in the United States the concept of democracy originally meant the dangerous rule of an untutored, unpropertied—and possibly unstable—majority over a "respectable," propertied, reliable minority. However, as the idea of democracy became popular in the United States, and as enfranchisement and citizenship rights gradually encompassed formerly disenfranchised groups, the concept of democracy shrugged off its lower-class, disreputable, majoritarian associations and transformed itself into a process whereby majority and minority somehow combined forces to rule through representative mechanisms (Pennock 1979). A vision of consensual democracy thus replaced a democracy of group conflict (see Sartori 1987: 88–89).

But this transformation of the democratic concept from conflict to consensus has not proven to be an unambiguously happy development. The difficulty is this: in its earlier incarnation, as the power of the poor majority over the rich minority, democracy promised (or threatened) greater equality between social classes (Hanson 1985). Equality promotes political participation, for where equality reigns, no segment of the population is systematically disadvantaged in the pursuit of political power. So by motivating people to act politically, equality promotes democracy. But modern democratic states have appropriated the rhetoric of democratic empowerment without delivering on the promise of equality. Indeed, not only do many remain disadvantaged, but the goal of equality itself has also faded. Therefore, the participation necessary to democratic empowerment lags.

In addition, "Modern states . . . however seriously they may take social or economic equality . . . are precluded by their very structure from giving more than token recognition to the ideal of political equality. Modern state structures concentrate power to a degree which no ancient state could have begun to emulate . . . " (Dunn 1979: 12–13). In short, even when states *do* strive for social equality, they must monopolize power so as to limit political democracy. We face a paradox: without social equality, there is incomplete political democracy; but to achieve social equality, a state structure must be so entrenched and powerful that no popular force can control it. Therefore, the political participation necessary to realize democracy dwindles either because of the power of want (the absence of social equality) or because of the want of power (the absence of political equality). And, to repeat, without sustained political participation, democracy as popular rule fails (Dahl 1985).

Of course, political participation has virtues other than popular rule. These include, *inter alia*, self-development (Nagel 1987: 11–12); the reforging of institutional power (MacPherson 1973: chap. 6); the psychological well-being conveyed by effective democratic action; and increased satisfaction with governmental performance (Pennock 1979: 465). Yet these benefits are secondary because they depend upon widespread political participation in the promotion of popular rule. Unless political participation actually increases popular rule, it will be revealed as a sham, and its secondary benefits will quickly vanish. For this reason, I intend to concentrate upon political participation as an aid to popular governance.

To be sure, political participation is not the sole defining quality of a democracy. Choice, majority rule, and minority rights are also required (Sartori 1987: 24–25). Yet political participation is necessary, if not sufficient, to popular rule. A major task for democratic theory, then, is to discover those conditions which promote political participation and which, therefore, favor democracy (for an attempt, see Held 1987).

Concerning political participation as a goal, Jane Mansbridge argues that an approach such as the one I have taken threatens to become "adversarial." Adversarial theories presuppose that pervasive group conflict will promote political participation. Mansbridge disagrees. Adversarial democracy is anticommunitarian; it subjects the will of one group in a society to the will of another, and therefore always disappoints losers (Sandel 1984; Mansbridge 1980). Losers therefore often leave the struggle.

Moreover, adversarial democracy sometimes allows a majority to deprive a minority of its legitimate rights, including the coveted right

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to participate. Adversarial democracy thus reduces the actual number of persons enjoying self-governance over time through a combined process of exclusion and recurrent defeat. Also, by accepting group conflicts as a given, adversarial democracy prevents a shared public interest from emerging. Ultimately, by institutionalizing and legitimating conflicting group interests, adversarial democracy destroys the fellow-feeling which generates political participation (for a critique, see Kelso 1978: chap. 8; Hart 1978).

Mansbridge argues that democratic participation need not be adversarial. Instead, she claims that high levels of political participation may emerge without group conflict. If citizens are connected to each other socially and share common goals, they will spontaneously celebrate and protect these goals through democratic action. Thus, group conflict will fade, and democratic participation will grow.

I disagree with this assessment. Mansbridge confuses cause and effect; her communal democracy is the *consequence* of prior agreement, not its creator. She demonstrates only that where there are no adversaries, adversarial democracy need not exist. Not only is this proposition true by definition, but the circumstances themselves are also rare, and can be found only in small communities (Dahl and Tufte 1973). Once communities enlarge, divisions of substantive interest always create opposing political forces, and political participation can no longer reflect an unadulterated public interest.

It follows, therefore, that in industrial democracies increased political participation requires conflicting group interests. But are the two phenomena linked causally? Does the perception of group conflict stimulate political participation? Although empirical evidence on this point is divided, most studies support the position that group conflict stimulates political participation (Jackman 1987: 405–24). Certainly the logic of the argument is straightforward: the power of each individual person is less in large than in small regimes; moreover, the individual's sense of spontaneously sharing interests with all his fellow citizens decreases as the size of the polity increases. Given these twin phenomena, it follows that (all other things being equal) people will participate less in large polities than in small. What then does motivate participation in large polities? A logical answer is membership in a group smaller than the polity as a whole, one in which the individual perceives a vital interest against nonmembers. In large polities more people participate in order to protect themselves or to impose their will on adversaries in conflict than to share in a national consensus. Ultimately, therefore, it is group contest and struggle which stimulate political participation in modern democracies (See also Dahl 1986: 244–245; Connolly 1987: 8; Barber 1984: 25).

My own position may be simply put. I define democracy as a system of rule in which there is widespread political participation among citizens; majority preferences rule in decision-making; governments implement policies favored by a majority; and citizens enjoy "moral equality" (Nagel 1988: 76), which protects the right of minorities to participate in politics. I argue that group conflict promotes these four components of the democratic project. I call the optimal form of group conflict *conflictive democratic participation.*

It is often pointed out that not all group conflict promotes democracy. I agree. The examples of countries such as Sri Lanka, India, and Israel, among other prominent cases, provide ample testimony to the many destructive forms group conflict can take in societies which aspire to democracy. There *is* some optimal form of group conflict that promotes democracy (Hart 1978). But I argue only that group conflict is *necessary* to democracy, not that it is *sufficient.* I discuss the form of group conflict I consider most helpful in a later section (p. 15).

Skeptics about the value of group conflict also point out that nonconflictive politics may not be the most important reason for widespread political apathy. As Mancur Olson and Anthony Downs have demonstrated, considerations other than the structure of group conflict often influence a "rational judgment" in favor of nonparticipation (Olson 1965; Downs 1957). These factors, too, must be addressed if increased democratic participation is to become a reality.

But these critics often overlook the fact that group conflict apparently helps to overcome rational nonparticipation (Miller et al. 1981: 203–13). Of course, the relationship is complex because, in already divided societies, political participation no doubt encourages people to perceive the group conflict that already exists and to develop in turn an ideology of conflict which stimulates further participation, and so on. Yet self-government through democratic processes is limited as much by the widespread absence of articulate ideological frameworks as by rational nonparticipation. More to the point, ideologies which encourage political participation are themselves "rational" reactions to the structure of group conflict.

It is also true that appropriate political institutions must focus group conflict in order for political participation to increase. People must not only perceive group conflict, but must also articulate such conflict through interest groups, mass movements, and especially political parties. Where party competition and party organization deteriorate, participation in politics languishes, a central insight supported empirically by numerous writers, most notably V. O. Key and Walter Dean Burnham (Key 1956; Epstein 1986: 255–56).

These, however, are secondary considerations to the many writers who argue the primary point that "too much" or "the wrong sorts of" conflict ultimately pose a danger to democratic regimes. Much recent democratic theory claims that vigorous group conflict often destroys a necessary consensus on the individual and group rights which are indispensable in a democracy. So there is a dilemma: unless group conflict exists, there will be too little participation to support self-government; but "too vigorous conflict" will tempt some groups to repress others, thereby reducing participation and destroying democracy (Huntington 1968).

But I feel these arguments demonstrate only that political participation, like other components of democratic regimes, is complex. However, no one disputes the fact that every account of democracy accepts widespread public participation. Because political participation is fragile and even volatile, democracies are fragile and occasionally volatile; but fragility and volatility in no way detract from the importance of political participation in helping to enhance democracy. After all, one must risk being burned in order to build a warming fire.

Moreover, arguments against "too much" participation are in an important sense simply beside the point. Once a regime proclaims itself democratic, it invites evaluations by reference to the amount and quality of political participation it achieves. The legitimacy of democracies suffers when citizens regularly eschew opportunities for political participation. When only a bare majority of eligible citizens in the United States vote in the most important of American elections—that for President; when only minorities vote in off-year elections (as in 1982, when 33.7 percent of the electorate voted); when barely 10 percent of the public take part in political organizations between elections; when the social group most advantaged by the equally distributed franchise (the working class) still votes 30 percent less frequently than the middle class (Cohen and Rogers 1983: 33); then the boasts of democratic regimes must fall on deaf ears. Nonparticipation in politics creates a no-man's land of disputed and uncertain legitimacy within which democratic regimes are vulnerable to internal and external opposition. If bitter group conflicts among a highly mobilized population threaten democratic institutions, so also does widespread apathy, which mocks protestations of true democracy.

To summarize, democracy requires widespread participation in governance. In large polities, such participation usually requires the perception and articulation of group conflict. Therefore, democracies have an interest in group conflict and in protecting and encouraging institutions which mobilize this conflict. To the degree that democratic regimes succeed in this endeavor, they move towards fuller realization of their democratic possibilities; to the degree that they do not, they blight the promise of democracy.

Democratic Limitations and Group Conflict: Four Perspectives

If it is a truism that democratic regimes have not fulfilled their aspirations toward political participation, nowhere is this proposition more dramatically or paradoxically illustrated than in the United States, where despite the diffusion of higher education to increasing numbers of people, the elimination of legal barriers to political participation, and the spread of affluence, political participation—for example, in the form of interest groups—remains pressure from a tiny minority of unrepresentative, wealthy people (Schlozman 1984: 1006–32). Thus, not only is political participation limited, but it is also dominated by a most unrepresentative few persons (but see Berry 1989: chap. 2).

Contemporary scholars have pursued the problem of limited and skewed political participation through institutional, economic, social-psychological, and cultural approaches. Of these four, it is the last two with which this study deals. I argue in this study that certain qualities of a society's popular culture subtly prepare people either to seek out political participation and welcome group conflict or to resist political participation and to reject group conflict. Often, the latter occurs, to the detriment of political participation. I do not argue that *only* culture and social psychology explain political participation. Each approach to political participation has some validity, though each is limited both empirically and logically. I do contend, however, that the most popular approaches—institutional, politico-economic, and social-psychological—depend upon cultural support. For this reason, cultural factors are integral to all forms and motives of political participation. Let me explain.

The institutional approach claims that appropriate political mechanisms are required to increase both the range and amount of political participation. For example, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) argue that easier registration arrangements would substantially increase voting in America. Many years ago, Key (1956) argued that party primaries factionalize and personalize politics, reduce citizen attention to issues, and eventually reduce voter turnout. Burnham (1970) argues that introduction of the Australian ballot weakened the capacity of American parties to mobilize voters. Powell (1986: 17–43) argues that single-party, winner-take-all voting districts limit voting participation. Advocates of proportional representation argue that legislative representation of minority-party candidates encourages voter participation, since fewer people have to choose between wasting a vote and voting for a candidate who is the least unpalatable alternative (for a review, see Jackman 1987: 405–24).

Yet the effects of these institutional features on voting are uncertain. No single set of political institutions has been shown to promote such participation uniformly. Instead, particular institutional factors are more or less powerful in different settings. For example, party primaries in the city of New York affect voter participation quite differently from party primaries in Mississippi. Under conditions of severe group conflict, proportional representation may actually serve as a conciliating force by representing the small number of moderate citizens. By contrast, under the same conditions, single-member districts may promote antagonism by forcing members of the principal conflict groups "to stay with their own" (Dahl 1966: chaps. 11–12). Thus, group antagonism—and therefore political participation—responds differently to identical institutional mechanisms. Moreover, institutions affect mainly voting. When one considers the volume or quality of political debate, for example, institutions retreat to a subsidiary position.

Not surprisingly, therefore, in the last thirty years, students of political participation have turned for help to social psychology. Social-psychological explanations focus on the attitudes and beliefs of individual persons rather than on the features of political institutions (see Abramson 1983). Yet the attitudinal approach has also proven limited. Problems of measurement have shown themselves stubbornly daunting. Moreover, the number of promising participation-related attitudes seems infinite. And even where there exists a reliable relationship between an attitude and an act of political participation, causality is by no means clear (Barry 1970). Finally, even deeply held attitudes usually explain only some forms of political participation, or the same form under some conditions but not under others, or some levels of participatory intensity better than others (see, for example, Hochschild 1984).

More reductionist in their treatment of political participation are theories of rational choice. Two such theories have led the way: that of Anthony Downs and that of Mancur Olson. Downs applies his arguments mainly to elections. He states that "skilled politicians whose main goal is to win will take similar stands on issues about which a majority might become passionate . . . and converge toward the median on any position that is a dominant concern to most voters" (Nagel 1987: 113). Voters at the extreme will either settle for the mainstream candidate nearest to (though still far from) their own position, or else abstain entirely. Many will abstain, as will many moderates who are indifferent between two candidates very like each other (but see Crewe and Searing 1988: 361–85).

Olson's theory extends to all forms of political participation, not just voting. Olson (1965) argues that in organizations that pursue collective benefits (i.e., benefits which all members can share equally, regardless of individual contribution), political participation is inherently limited. Under these conditions, the "natural" human desire to get something for nothing predisposes each person to abstain from participating while profiting from the efforts of others, who presumably *do* participate. Also, because people calculate that the value of their personal contribution to attaining a successful collective outcome is meager, they may rationally abstain from acting. In sum, regardless of attitudinal preferences or institutional form, large conflict groups pursuing collective goals will have difficulty motivating their supporters to participate.

But, despite his efforts to do so, Olson does not help us understand instances of high participation in the pursuit of collective goals. Nor does he explain values such as altruism that have been shown experimentally to compensate for the antiparticipatory factors he describes (Douglas 1986; Marwell and Ames 1979: 1335–60; 1980: 926–37). Olson also ignores the fact that in some cultures, nonparticipation is almost shameful. And where there is significant group conflict over goals, individuals may feel a strong sense of solidarity with those who share their views—so much so, in fact, that they may participate regularly despite the limitations of their individual contributions (for example, Fantasia 1988).

Finally, neither Downs nor Olson explains how people decide what actually *constitutes* a "contribution," or what an "acceptable" calculus of costs and benefits is, or whether it is right to profit from the efforts of others. *Contribution, cost-benefit calculi,* and *morality* are all matters of cultural variation. In some cultures the acceptable ratio of personal reward to collective effort may be low; in others it may be high. To a Protestant, giving a gift to a friend may be a selfless act; to a Buddhist, the same gift may establish an enduring relationship of reciprocity and patronage (for a range of views, see Bailey 1971). Without considering culture, rational-choice explanations of participation lose much

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