

The Rhetorical Surface of Democracy

How Deliberative Ideals
Undermine Democratic Politics

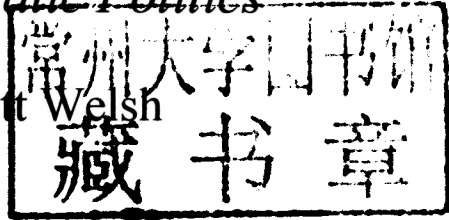
Scott Welsh

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The Rhetorical Surface of Democracy

For Oliver Dewey

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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: The Cure for What Ails You	1
1 Taking Politics Out of Rhetoric	23
2 Coming to Terms with Rhetoric	63
3 Democratic Ends	89
4 Truth against Judgment	111
5 Between Rhetorical Reflection and Political Agency	137
Conclusion: Democracy at the Edge of the Abyss	159
Bibliography	165
Index	175
About the Author	183

Introduction: The Cure for What Ails You

Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communication. It had its seer in Walt Whitman. It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication.

For public opinion is judgment which is formed and entertained by those who constitute the public and is about public affairs.

The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public.

John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*¹

Perhaps better than anyone, John Dewey anticipated the contemporary insistence that better communication would solve democracy's problems. If only people talked more, they would understand each other. If only scientists did a better job of explaining the results of their research, the public would be able to form reliable judgments. If only politicians and journalists approached communication as a genuine art, previously apathetic citizens would soar together on the "winged words of conversation."² With improved communication, publics would critically reflect on their values and transform their moral outlooks in response to new challenges. With improved communication, Dewey argued, there would be "no limit" to public intelligence. And the only thing we need to do in order to usher in a democracy of citizens deliberating toward common judgments is replace disingenuous rhetorical contests for power with genuine "inquiry and publicity."³

Yet, nearly a century later, the future never comes. As election after election passes and we begin to suspect that maybe politicians are more interested in winning than promoting intellectual uplift, we wait. As scholars periodically update Dewey's message to better comport with recent philosophical trends, we wait. In the face of unimpressive results, prominent political theorists, for example, continue to insist that improved public deliberation, understood as a dialogical exchange of reasons between citizens, would produce true democracy. Decisions following widespread back-and-forth reasoning, deliberative theorists argue, would be more genuinely democratic because they would be responsive to a wider range of arguments. The widespread exchange of arguments and counterarguments, they also insist, would put democratic politics into closer contract with the truth. While their formularies differ, theorists of what has come to be called deliberative democracy prescribe communication as the cure for what ails contemporary democratic practice.⁴

Although frequently critical of deliberative theories of democracy, self-professed rhetorical theorists largely endorse deliberative aims and ideals. Their main concern regarding theories of deliberative democracy is that public deliberation conducted as orderly, reasoned discussion excludes the voices of citizens who have not already mastered the deliberative conventions and norms of the more highly educated. More genuinely inclusive deliberation would, instead, assign equal value to all forms of communication, taking special care not to diminish rhetorical modes of address. Beyond the calm, measured deliberative norms suitable to those who already enjoy numerous economic and educational advantages, the genuine voice of the people is heard, they argue, in moving stories, emotional outbursts, provocative metaphors, silent protests, and boisterous demonstrations. Truly democratic public opinion, rhetorical theorists often argue, emerges from the everyday communication characteristic of and addressed to the people as they are and not as more idealistic deliberative theorists wish them to be.⁵

Yet the claim that rhetorical, vernacular modes of speech could improve public deliberation in democracy is especially surprising in light of the fact that it is not clear that such rhetoric is in short supply; we see what rhetoric can do everyday. In contrast, dialogue has never really been performed on a broad scale, leaving us free to dream about its potential to produce more or better democracy. Consequently rhetorical theorists must argue that it is the increased presence of *particular* rhetorical practices or themes that will finally deliver on democracy's promises, not rhetoric in general. Perhaps more neighborly rhetoric, some suggest, would enhance democratic legitimacy and judgment, or rhetoric that is more prophetic, more humanizing, more addressed to citizens' capacity for judgment, more vulnerable, more bridge-building, more artistic, more local, more agonistic, more willing to speak an audience's language, more dialogical, more playful, and so on. Each silver

bullet is aimed at some unwanted element or consequence of political speech in democracy that allegedly renders current institutions undemocratic, unwise, or both.⁶

Although the number of proposed communication cures continues to multiply and divide, I submit that what they share is more significant than what they do not. And what they share is a commitment to Dewey's account of the public and its problems. Dewey described the problem of democracy as a group decision-making problem in which citizens and experts converge to make decisions about how to order life in society. Following Dewey, deliberative and rhetorical theorists each construe the aim of democratic politics in the same way—as the production of collective, broadly inclusive, wise political decisions (also referred to as political judgment, public wisdom, public opinion, or public judgment). It is this primary articulation of democratic politics with supposedly authentic public opinion or genuine public judgment that leads scholars to keep looking for alternatives to democratic politics conducted as a contest for power. Moreover, the reason that communication in democracy so often descends into *mere* contests for power, deliberative and rhetorical theorists argue, is because democratic politics is organized around the need to win elections.⁷ Hence, in one swift motion, they reject political speech as we know it and cast into doubt the democratic significance of elections—all in favor of a deeper, more authentic democratic practice.

Perhaps the rest of the book can be reduced to the following overly simple claim: What deliberative and rhetorical theorists have done is substituted the democratic articulation of the people (*demos*) and power (*kratia*) with an articulation of the people and decision-making (*phronesis*), thereby severing the essential articulation of the people and power that constitutes democracy.⁸

LIPPMANN'S POLITICAL REALISM

Walter Lippmann, of course, famously rejected the idea that publics could make decisions, understood either realistically as prevailing public opinion or idealistically as public judgment. He regarded any sense of publics as capable of having opinions as phantasmal, an imaginary projection of calculating politicians and imaginative political theorists.⁹ Insofar as a public opinion or public judgment exists among citizens, Lippmann argued it exists only insofar as citizens are convinced that it exists. The incoherent mass of individual beliefs, prejudices, and ideals—the raw material of public opinion—can only be made to seem coherent by effective political speakers in collaboration with willing audiences. Hence, as an empirical question, Lipp-

mann says that public opinion is a fiction. Concerning the potential for individual opinions to (somehow) coalesce into wise political decisions, he argued that none of us have the requisite time, training, or interest to engage in informed and effective public deliberation on more than a small number of issues.

For Lippmann, the belief that citizens have enough experience with enough issues to be regular, productive contributors to political decision-making is not only absurd but also dangerous. It is absurd because even the best-trained scientists are only equipped to understand relevant evidence in the area closest to their specialty. It is dangerous, according to Lippmann, because citizens who believe that they have worthwhile opinions on matters they do not understand can, through the public championing of ignorance, artificially constrain the decisions made by elected officials. Against Dewey's vision of genuine democracy as citizens engaged in deliberation leading to well-rounded collective judgments, Lippmann argues that anything even resembling such collective convergence is only possible through candidates for elected office competing to produce the appearance of settled judgments. The effect of apparent convergence can only be produced, he argues, by political actors strategically deploying ambiguous, ideologically loaded symbols.

Lippmann did not believe that the rule of the people could be approximated except through such rhetorical contests for political support.¹⁰ At times, he even marveled at the ability of an expansive, clogged, diverse, narrow-minded, booming and busting nation to produce anything resembling the consent of the governed. When he was not contrasting his understanding of public opinion with more idealistic ones, he was able to appreciate, particularly in the middle chapters of *Public Opinion*, the achievement of even the apparently limited democracy he lived in.¹¹ Because it is impossible for a nation inhabited by hundreds of millions of people to agree on anything of significant precision, he could see that politicians skilled in the arts of strategic ambiguity and bold promises are not simply a necessary evil but are, perhaps, the true sponsors of the very possibility of democracy.¹² Such figures enable a people of conflicting desires and incoherent beliefs to offer their support to politicians performing the dramatic role of characters competing for citizens' trust. Moreover, they enable individual citizens to each construct their own imaginary publics or a phantom publics—which are better able to foster the *experience* of democratic legitimacy than the alleged real thing itself.¹³

Rather than conceptualizing democracy as free and enriching communication in pursuit of public judgment, I similarly approach democracy as a means of coping with the fundamental impossibility of public opinion or public judgment. I take seriously Lippmann's claim that democracy is not best construed as the empowerment of deliberated, expressed public opinion.

This is not to say that publics full of people with opinions do not exist. It also does not mean that individuals do not often haggle back and forth over the meaning of political events and end up locating a potentially actionable range of overlapping projections. What it does mean is that neither mass public opinion nor mass public judgment is able to emerge in a positive state. Instead, the existence of public opinion or public judgment is inherently indirect. For Lippmann, the metaphor of democracy as rule by the people is only rendered meaningful in the official, indirect, silent, tabulated registration of support for (or opposition to) elected officials and the policies they come to represent in individuals' minds.¹⁴ While individual citizens may be able to convincingly articulate what a candidate, party, or ballot measure means to them, publics cannot.

Lippmann, however, did not fully appreciate his own critique of Dewey. Instead, his criticism of the idea of public opinion remains stuck within a realist-versus-idealist framework that too often emphasizes contingent reasons for the lack of *good* public opinion. For example, he writes that, "In the absence of institutions and education by which the environment is so successfully reported that the realities of public life stand out sharply against self-centered opinion, the common interests very largely elude public opinion entirely, and can be managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond locality."¹⁵ Lippmann continues to imagine a possible future in which journalism is better informed by science, thereby fostering a public capable of practical wisdom. He imagines educators and expert mediators trained to untangle stereotypes and strip emotions from public opinion. "Re-education of this kind," he argues, "will help bring our public opinions into grip with the environment." Through such re-education, he speculates, "the enormous censoring, stereotyping, and dramatizing apparatus can be liquidated."¹⁶ In this regard, Lippmann is not far from Habermas's *Toward a Rational Society*, wherein Habermas argues that the biggest challenge facing human emancipation is the inability of science to penetrate public consciousness. It is only when scientific knowledge is understood and appropriated by citizens, in journalistic form, that public opinion might become reliably resistant to manipulative rhetoric.¹⁷

Hence, no less than Dewey or Habermas, Lippmann continually affirms the desirability of a vision of citizens able to arrive at wise public judgments. Lippmann just had little hope that such a state of affairs would ever emerge. However, by granting the legitimacy of the ideal, he re-opens the door to the basic concept itself. Instead, he should have rested his case with his initial rejection of the very idea of public opinion. He should have continued with his insistence that even election results do not tell us which specific policy configurations citizens favor, only that they preferred a particular candidate or party (and we don't know which or why). Even seemingly more precise measures, like opinion polls, only measure a momentary projection of unique

and irreconcilable affections onto particular candidates or carefully crafted questions.¹⁸ Likewise, even public opinion as it is alleged to materialize across multiple surveys immediately devolves into incoherence (health insurance should cover every treatment a patient may want regardless of its demonstrated efficacy *and* premiums must come down). Yet instead of insistently maintaining that the very idea of public opinion is fatally incoherent, Lippmann eventually relents, saying that even if there were such a thing as public opinion, it would not constitute a sound basis for making policy decisions.¹⁹ This shift diverts his attention from a more complete rejection of the very idea of public opinion to the more limited rejection of *existing* citizens' opinions. This shift in attention, however, concedes (to Dewey and his followers) the reduction of the question of the possibility of public opinion to a question of the present possibility of valuable public opinion, thereby facilitating the ongoing evasion of the primary question—the possibility of public opinion itself.

If Lippmann had stuck with the guiding idea of the early chapters of *Public Opinion*, that public opinion is a phantom because all human beings live within individual “pseudo-environments” uniquely assembled from the ambiguous contents of language and culture, he would have been on stronger footing to reject the concept entirely.²⁰ Michel de Certeau, for example, is better prepared to fully reject public opinion when he argues that the experience of an event or text is inalienably individual. The “reader” always projects meaning onto texts that will not be reducible to any other projection. Consuming media and culture, Certeau argues, is to enter a semi-private world in which the consumer animates the inanimate. Words do not speak for themselves, so we must speak for them. Every event is interpreted within an individual fantasy space made up of all of one's prior, unique acts of cultural consumption.²¹ Hence, no two projections onto the screen of public opinion are ever the same. Or, as Lippmann also argued, no two experiences of an event are in alignment because we each navigate “the blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world” in the only way possible—peering through the windows of our unique pseudo-environments.²²

Noting how Lippmann could have more consistently and thoroughly rejected the idea of public opinion is important because it has the potential to redirect our attention toward what does bring democracy to life. If he had more fully committed to the impossibility of public opinion as a structural feature of the use of language itself, that which manifests in *Public Opinion* as cynicism—his “realistic” account of the fantastic nature of public opinion and of how skillful politicians simulate it in order to be granted a share of institutional power broadly regarded as legitimate—might be reborn as the essential acts upon which democracy depends. From such a perspective, those who are able to deploy ideologically loaded words in such a way that they can win a share of power and be perceived as obligated to act on what

they have promised are the day-to-day sponsors of democracy. In the face of the impossibility of public judgment, such figures perform characters upon which diverse judgments can be projected. In the absence of public opinion, they make something out of nothing.

CYNICAL DEMOCRACY

Nevertheless, Lippmann *is* cynical (in Slavoj Žižek's sense of the word) and cynicism, Žižek argues, is the height of ideological delusion.²³ But what is ideological delusion if it is fully embodied by a figure, like Lippmann, who clearly has no illusions about how power is exercised in democratic politics as we know it? Cynics are ideologically deluded, according to Žižek, to the degree that their thoughts and actions continue to be structured by an ideology in which they no longer believe. "The cynical subject," he argues, "is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and social reality but he none the less still insists upon the mask."²⁴ In Lippmann's case, he recognizes that public opinion is a phantom but he repeatedly says that it would be good if informed, deliberative public opinion were possible anyway. The question is, why is Lippmann unable to let go of the ideal? Maintaining the desirability of the rejected ideal is a license to assert *reluctant* rejection. Lippmann can say to himself and others that he genuinely wishes that citizens could be more involved in government but they simply cannot be trusted due to unavoidable limitations of time, attention, and training. Concerning the citizen's deficiencies in light of the false ideal, he gets to say, "I shall not denounce him further," while at the same time proceeding, chapter after chapter, to demonstrate the worthlessness of citizens' opinions.²⁵ Declaring his ongoing allegiance to the impossible ideal permits him to argue that he does not approve of democratic politics as a tawdry, elite, rhetorical contest for power while recommending it nevertheless.²⁶

Lippmann was unable to fully embrace democratic politics as he understood it because he was unable to fully reject Dewey's democracy of citizens in pursuit of public judgment. This is unfortunate because Lippmann's sense of politics has more democratic potential than Dewey-inspired visions of collaborative public deliberation. Lippmann correctly saw that citizens cannot be and never have been democracy's primary actors, even if they are the ideological source of democratic legitimacy. Rather, democracy's primary agents are visible political actors, skilled in the arts of rhetorical ingenuity and ambiguity, all the while aiming for power.²⁷ In other words, Lippmann attempted what very few have tried. He aimed to explain why instrumental, rhetorical, power-seeking speech is essential to democracy. Nevertheless, Lippmann failed. He did not fail because he offered a poor account of politi-

cal speech in democracy. It would be wrong to say that his descriptions are not largely accurate, while partial, even nearly a century later; Habermas offers similar descriptions widely received as uncontroversial statements of fact.²⁸ Rather, Lippmann failed to accomplish the revaluation of the prominent struggle for power through language because he offered his vision of rhetorical, pragmatic democracy as a concession to deficient public judgment, second-best to Dewey's pursuit of it. As a concession, however, the rhetorical contest for power is marked as a regrettable departure from wise deliberation instead of as the instrument of democracy.

Lippmann's failure has been worth briefly revisiting because contemporary theories of political speech in democracy make a similar mistake whenever concepts of practical wisdom or inclusive public judgment are accepted as the highest aim of democracy. This is as true for the seemingly most assertive defenses of rhetoric as it is for its deliberative critics. More importantly, whenever political speech is articulated with wisdom over power, deliberation over assertion, its connection to democracy is loosened. This is because democracy is not a mode of inquiry, aiming to address knowledge problems. Rather, democracy is addressed to power problems or, more precisely, problems associated with the institutionalization of power. Since the pursuit of wise action and the pursuit of power are not reducible to each other (as inseparable as they may be), to make the aim of democracy public judgment is to put democracy in service to something other than the problem of the institutionalization of power. When democracy no longer means the people and power but is converted into the people and wisdom, our definitions of rhetoric also shift in response.

WISDOM AGAINST WINNING

Aristotle, of course, immediately articulated political speech in democracy with wisdom. More specifically, he cast political speech, understood as rhetoric, as the concession that contingency extracts from philosophy. The realm of the political, as Aristotle's contemporary interpreters often explain, is for him the realm of uncertain relationships, unpredictable outcomes, and human desire. Amid such contingency, philosophy, understood as a dialectical pursuit of timeless wisdom, has a reduced role. In its place, Aristotle offers rhetoric as the appropriate means of securing whatever limited wisdom is possible in the uncertain and fickle realm of the political.²⁹ Hence, Aristotle, like Lippmann, locates the necessity of rhetoric in the impossibility of a more orderly dialectical practice. Also like Lippmann, Aristotle recommends rhetoric as the way to facilitate the production of wise political decisions, except that Aristotle saw situated wisdom emerging from rhetorical deliberation

whereas Lippmann believed that rhetoric was a necessary means to gaining public support for proposals already deemed wise by elites. Nevertheless, each orients rhetoric to the problem of decision-making rather than to the institutionalization of power.

Contemporary appropriations of the sophists offer very little resistance to Aristotle's articulation of rhetoric with wisdom. To the degree that such generalizations are productive, they simply take Aristotle's argument a step further. Just as Aristotle locates rhetoric within the realm of the uncertain and unpredictable, modern-day sophists suggest that all human truth is fundamentally contingent. Therefore, all wisdom is rhetorically constructed and subject to rhetorical revision. Or, as Isocrates argued, rhetoric is the appropriate name for philosophy.³⁰ In both instances, the Aristotelian and the sophistic, rhetoric is immediately put in relationship to the problem of wise action. Contemporary interpreters of both Aristotle and the sophists then conclude that, because truth is made rather than found, we need as many citizens as possible speaking from as many points of view as possible in order to arrive at reliable practical wisdom.³¹ This seemingly obvious conclusion, however, sets in motion a revision of the idea of democracy. When articulated with a vision of rhetoric as a means of collaboratively producing public judgment, democracy is reduced to a standard by which to assess the process of arriving at public judgment. Thus, instead of rhetoric serving democracy as a means of accomplishing the institutionalization of power, democracy now serves rhetoric as a standard by which to assess the production of wisdom. In other words, not only is rhetoric reduced to the pursuit of practical wisdom but democracy also becomes, simply, the *inclusive* pursuit of practical wisdom in which the *demos*, as a whole, should be involved. The overall effect is to loosen the connection of both rhetoric and democracy to the pressing competition for institutional power. Even more than loosened, the pursuit of institutional power is often criticized, no less by rhetoric's most ardent defenders, as degrading public wisdom and undermining its "democratization." In such cases, rhetoric aiming at power is dismissed as exclusionary, plebiscitary, propagandistic, or demagogic. Hence, unlike Lippmann, defenders of "deliberative" rhetoric, as discussed in the following chapter, are unable to see the rhetorical pursuit of power as even second best.

To simplify, the emerging distinction between rhetoric as the pursuit of wisdom and rhetoric as the pursuit of power is perhaps reflected in the distinction between dissent and opposition. Dissent, as the word is often used, is resistance to an idea or plan. Dissent plays the game of deliberation and wisdom. Opposition, on the other hand, plays the game of politics and power. Opposition is about unseating elected officials and repopulating positions of institutional authority. Dissenters aim to be heard; opponents aim to dislodge. When, during the recent war in Iraq, President George W. Bush said, "I listen to all voices, but mine is the final decision. . . I hear the voices,