

## The emotional life of politics

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*Media and the Restyling of Politics*, John Corner and Dick Pels (eds.) (2003) London and New York: Sage, 210 pages. Hardback, ISBN 0761949208, \$84.95 (£60.00), ISBN; Paperback, ISBN 0761949206, \$32.95 (£18.99).

### Abstract

This edited collection makes an important contribution to the ongoing redefinition of politics, which has been in progress at least since the early 1990s. Under the heading of the “restyling of politics,” a number of the essays here concern three themes – political marketing, celebrity culture in politics, and the personalization of politics – all of which have typically been taken as evidence of decay of the corruption of politics by consumer culture/popular culture/therapy culture. Between them, the authors in this collection offer a clear affirmation of the potential benefits to civic culture and representative democracy of marketing, celebrity and personalization. They suggest that democracy can be reinvigorated if more citizens can connect with its key institutional processes, and that such reconnection can be fostered by the “restyling of politics.”

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### Keywords

Celebrity culture, democracy, media, personalization, politics, political marketing, spin

This outstanding collection of essays should serve on into the next decade as an important contribution to the ongoing redefinition of politics, which has been in progress at least since the early 1990s. Now – thanks to work such as this – such a redefinition is achieving substantial understanding of the cultural, aesthetic and emotional dimensions of politics. A number of the essays here concern three themes – political marketing, celebrity culture in politics, and the personalization of politics – all of which have typically been taken as evidence of decay of the corruption of politics by consumer culture/popular culture/therapy culture (take your pick depending on your preferred vocabulary for lamenting socio-cultural decline). All these themes are found at the interface between politics and media, and often converge in critiques of the increasing management of political communication. So this book could be said to be about political communication. Indeed, given that the way in which much debate about the state of contemporary politics is often framed around its media relations, e.g. around allegations of ‘spin’, the specialist field of political communication has become a key site for debate about the nature of politics. However, as the editors say in their introduction, the term ‘political communication’ is now too narrow and too functionalist-sounding a label for capturing ‘the breadth and complexity of mediatised politics’(p.5).

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Between them, the authors in this collection offer a clear (yet subtle and qualified) affirmation of the potential benefits to civic culture and representative democracy of marketing, celebrity and personalization. This, of course, runs counter

to a great deal of prevailing wisdom, especially that purveyed by many in the cadre of journalists and commentators who are so influential in defining the terms of debate. The affirmation uses various versions of a basic argument. This is that democracy can be reinvigorated if more citizens can connect with its key institutional processes. Such connection is fostered when citizens can locate politics in the dramatic narratives within which they live and make sense of their own lives: narratives of personal relationships as places of pleasure and pain, of individuals struggling to make the right decisions, both ethically and pragmatically, and of a surrounding popular culture offering - *inter alia* - excitement and release. Some of these narratives are of course those of the 'soap', though Liesbet van Zoonen notes tellingly that journalists' use of the soap metaphor for politics misses these aspects and focuses almost exclusively on the 'modernist' discourse of soap as trivializing and corrupting. Such narratives can also be found (again, amidst much else) in celebrity culture. Thus, John Street identifies the affective links that people make with celebrities, and the possibilities for quasi-celebrity performances of style to be engaging for audiences, and perhaps of expressive value to them. He argues for this cultural theory of politics over the economic theory which we might take to be the basis of political marketing. Indeed much of the marketing contribution to politics to date has been to mimic the application of traditional commercial techniques.

However, in her chapter, Margaret Scammell makes the case for more not less political marketing. She makes this argument on the grounds that commercial marketing is now, via services and relationship marketing, moving beyond a simplistic and remorseless focus on profit. Pushed by consumer activism and citizen-consumers, corporate strategists face the need to convince their stakeholders of their concern for the common weal. Scammell sees potential lessons here for politics, not least in relation to the 'internal markets' of party supporters. W. Lance Bennett is somewhat less upbeat about this potential, perhaps as the only U.S.-based contributor to this collection, but is equally emphatic about the transformation of citizenship in the 'new cosmopolitan politics' (p.147) of global citizen-consumers, and questions whether the national polity can host the new agendas and forms of participation.

Other chapters outline important contexts of the cultural shift in communication practices, and thereby also in the substance of politics, suggested by these emphases on consumer power and popular culture. Jon Simons reviews the challenges posed to elite conceptions of politics and their pessimistic views of popular culture, though he himself seeks to tread a sort of Foucauldian middle path between pessimists and enthusiastic populists. Peter Dahlgren provides an illuminating discussion of 'civic culture' as the site for political renewal, and - using examples of global activist networks - of the emergent role of the internet as a major vehicle for this renewal. Moving further into new forms of participation, Bronislaw Szerszynski takes examples from environmental activism to explore the creative expansion of political semiotics, noting however that strong stylistic 'marking' in dress or behavior can isolate the protester from the mainstream.

The two editors themselves contribute wide-ranging chapters. Dick Pels weaves together the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of the new paradigm, pointing out the crucial place of authenticity in citizen evaluations of televisual political figures. He also takes on a crucial challenge for any advocate of an emotionalized politics, which is the argument that it leads to totalitarian demagogy. Pels counters in turn with the argument that 'we cannot leave the aestheticization of politics to the (historical) right' (p.52). John Corner maps the spaces within and around which the public personae of political figures are constructed, showing the

interrelations between public, organizational and private spheres. He also lays down some suggestive markers for the study of political leadership in the context of restyled politics, linking sociological, cultural and psychological dimensions. Perhaps one could say it is an omission from the book that there is not more work on leadership. It does not discuss how an aestheticized, personalised, citizen-consumer oriented politics might be more fully realized, and how such a realization would in part have to be a prospectus for a somewhat different kind of political leader. It would be fairer to suggest that one value of the book is in showing the need for work of this kind.

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Finally, why 'restyling'? Frank Ankersmit's philosophical essay, which opens this collection, underpins this conception of what the book is about. He sees style as something beyond the ken of classical political rationality, but immanent in all forms of representative democracy, in that this requires reflection by the political class on how they represent, and represent themselves to, the electorate. Yet why *restyling*? At one level the book makes a strong case for seeing present developments as anticipating the *first* comprehensive styling of politics, in a modern, cultural sense of style as affectively-charged, sensuous social identity.