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MURRAY EDELMAN ON SYMBOLS
AND IDEOLOGY IN
DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

ABSTRACT: For Murray Edelman, political realities are largely inaccessible to the public, save by the mediation of symbols generated by elites. Such symbols often create the illusion of political solutions to complex problems—solutions devised by experts, implemented by effective leaders, and undemonstrably successful in their results.

Reading the work of Murray Edelman can be both rewarding and irritating. In a series of books and essays, Edelman examined such important issues as elite manipulation of public opinion, the role of ideology in mass politics, and media bias. Edelman asked big questions and reached unsettling answers. However, Edelman's writings are marred by an ideological bias of his own that tends to obscure the real insights in his work. This should give pause both to those who agree with Edelman's New Left political commitments, but demand more than the unscholarly reiteration of them (e.g., Fenster 2005), and those who do not share those commitments (or who are unsure if they should). Edelman has acquired a small cult following among political scientists with an ideological bent similar to his own, but the very politics that may account for this following keeps his analysis of

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mass opinion from fulfilling its potential as a source of new perspectives on the nature of political power in modern democracies.

This essay examines Edelman's principal contributions regarding elite governance in contemporary democracies. I begin by discussing two of Edelman's most important books, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964) and *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1988), which focus on information diffusion in mass societies and its ramifications for elite rule. Along the way, I will point to several glaring examples of intellectual complacency in Edelman's work, which indicate that he never grasped the full implications of his own ideas. The paper concludes with a general discussion of governance in modern democracies. First, though, I suggest that Edelman indirectly explained why the inhabitants of Western societies are so prone to retreat into the "private" realm, instead of engaging with democratic politics.

Edelman's Incipient Defense of the Private Sphere

Among the recurrent themes of Edelman's work is the manipulation of politics by elites—whether policy experts, the media, or the legislators and bureaucrats who staff the modern state. He was deeply concerned that mass ignorance created unique opportunities for the elite manipulation of both the public's comprehension of, and opinions about, politics in modern societies. Edelman (1988, 33) bluntly recognized that "the obliviousness of 'the masses' to a high proportion of the issues that seize the attention of those with an avid interest in public affairs is a potent political weapon for most of the people of the world though it remains largely unrecognized in academic writing."

Citing numerous studies of public opinion and electoral behavior, Edelman (1964, 172) recognized that instead of closely monitoring elected officials and carefully examining political issues, "the mass public does not study and analyze detailed data about [issues such as] secondary boycotts, provisions for stock ownership, and control of a proposed space communications corporation." Instead, voter attention is drawn to political issues only after "political actions and speeches make them symbolically threatening or reassuring, and then it responds to the cues furnished by the actions and the speeches, not to direct knowledge of the facts" (ibid.).

Edelman provided a bold explanation of why voters are so ignorant

of politics. Contrary to the rational-ignorance hypothesis, which portrays voters as choosing to be politically ignorant because they recognize the small probability that their vote will influence any large election (e.g., Downs 1957 and Somin 1998), Edelman argues that voter ignorance is caused by voters' inherent cognitive limitations and the complexity of modern societies. Echoing Walter Lippmann (1922) and Joseph Schumpeter (1950), Edelman recognized that the issues consuming the attention of political elites lead to consequences that are not directly perceivable by ordinary citizens in their day-to-day lives. Edelman (1964, 5) thus characterizes the *private* sphere as "the immediate world in which people make and do things that have directly observable consequences." In this sphere, unlike in the public sphere, "men can check their acts and assumptions against the consequences and correct errors. There is feedback" (ibid). Consumers may experiment with goods and services, and the effects of these experiments are tangible. Goods and services either bring utility or they do not, even if the ultimate reasons for why they do or do not aren't apparent to the consumer.

In contrast to deliberative democratic theorists who deplore the private realm and attempt to extend democratic politics to all spheres of life (e.g., Pateman 1970), Edelman (1988, 35) recognizes that for most modern citizens, the aspects of life that are meaningful are specifically those that do not extend into the public sphere. Indeed, "most experiences that make life joyful, poignant, boring, or worrisome are not part of the news: the grounds for personal concern, frustration, encouragement and hope; the conditions that matter at work, at home, and with friends; the events people touch, as distinct from those that are 'reported'; the experience of financial distress or of opulence; children in trouble; lovers; alienating or gratifying jobs."

However, the public realm has no similar meaning to the citizen-observer, nor can the citizen test the important consequences of public policies, as they can in the private realm. Instead of experiencing feedback from political decisions, "for most men most of the time politics is a series of pictures in the mind, placed there by television news, newspapers, magazines, and discussions. The pictures create a moving panorama taking place in a world the mass public never quite touches, yet one its members come to fear or cheer, often with passion and sometimes with action" (Edelman 1964, 5). In politics "there is no such check on fantasies and conceptualizing" as is produced by the feedback people get from their private decisions, because

the link between dramatic political announcements and their impact on people is so long and so tangled. These people may be right or they may be wrong. The point is that there is no necessity, and often no possibility, of continuously checking their convictions against real conditions. (Ibid., 7.)

Edelman's musings regarding the differential informational burdens facing the public and private realms may offer an alternative to standard explanations for the bifurcation of modern societies, and for the corresponding fetishization of private existence. It is possible that the allure of consumer society is derived, not from some grand conspiracy among dominant economic groups, but rather from humans' fundamental cognitive limitations. Specifically, we may find the private sphere fascinating in comparison to the public sphere simply because, as Edelman recognized, it is susceptible to direct perception, seemingly avoiding the need for rigorous abstract thinking. In this sense, Western democracies' tendency to collapse into the ostentatious frivolity of the private sphere may be a direct consequence of the epistemological problems that Edelman discovered in his analysis of mass societies.

Edelman on Ignorance-Based Elite Rule

In place of evaluating direct feedback from public policies, Edelman's citizenry relies on elites to make statements and symbolic gestures that create in the citizens' imagination a "real world" of politics. The public's reliance upon opinion-making elites has dramatic ramifications for democratic theory. For if the electorate relies on elites to isolate, explain, and frame the issues that come to be considered political problems, the voters, who are supposed to use politics to direct democratic governments, may actually be directed by the elites they are supposed to control.

If the electorate relies upon elites to "filter" knowledge regarding social problems and their causes, "the common assumption that what democratic government does is somehow always a response to the moral codes, desires, and knowledge embedded inside people is as inverted as it is reassuring" (Edelman 1964, 172). Indeed, what actually happens in "democratic" polities may have less to do with translating popular sentiment into public policy than with *shaping* popular sentiment.

Public policies spring, to that extent, not from a welling-up of popu-

lar sentiment, but from a top-down process of symbol generation and manipulation that presumably begins with the socialization and acculturation of the leaders of mass opinion. The movies and TV watched, the books and magazines encountered, the professors admired, the assignments read, and the peer conversations engaged in by future journalists, celebrities, novelists, filmmakers, and politicians—especially while they are children and young adults—may dictate the politics of the democracy in which they are soon to be at the apex of symbolic generation (cf. Friedman 2007). If politics is too complex to understand directly, what alternative is there than for the mass public to rely on cues from such political elites (cf. Zaller 1996) who, in turn, are themselves primed by socialization through political symbols?

This is not to say that there will necessarily be one monolithic opinion elite. Perhaps competing elites will exert conflicting influences on the mass public. And perhaps different elites (academic, news-media, entertainment-media) will have different perspectives. However this may be, Edelman (1964, 185–86) is deeply pessimistic about the rationality of this process, however competitive it is. Far from the process resulting in a measured analysis of political events,

we are constantly aware of the strong effort, often conscious but more significantly subconscious, of supporters and of opponents of a political figure to see what they want to see: to make the world conform to the pattern that fits their conceptual framework and values. Observation of politics is not simply an effort to learn what is happening but rather a process of making observations conform to assumptions.

Edelman focuses, as is the convention in “bias” studies, on the news (rather than entertainment or high-culture) media, often suggesting that news coverage that highlights the scandalous and stories of “human interest” “divorce[s]” the public from the realm of public-policy making. When the news media do cover public affairs,

everyone is taught that influence should be exerted in the public realm even though the news reports from that world also imbue the public with the view that stronger and more fundamental forces than their own wishes are critical: economic conditions, military imbalances, majority votes, psychological needs and impulses, and other constructs that teach people how impotent they are against complex, remote, and untouchable developments. . . . In this sense the news helps everyone to accept their experienced lives by creating another world of symbols

and fetishes. In doing so it encourages acceptance of the stable social structures and the inequalities that shape their experiences. (Edelman 1988, 98–99.)

So despite what “everyone is taught” officially, as it were, about their efficacy as citizens, Edelman concludes that the effect of the news media is to “call attention to the long odds against success in changing social conditions and to the irrelevance of personal sensibility . . . discourag[ing] resistance to immanent conditions and,” therefore, “rationaliz[ing] acceptance of the world as it is” (ibid).

This is quite a series of claims. However, even if we grant Edelman that the media draw attention to the pointlessness of individual efforts in politics (although one might imagine, on the contrary, that the media lionize the lone individual who stands up to the powers that be—the corporate or CIA whistleblower, the dogged journalist, the straight-talking politician), wouldn’t the media be right to do so? Are economic conditions, military imbalances, and election outcomes actually under individual voters’ personal control? Non-elite individuals aren’t meaningful actors in such processes, and if the media did report this fact, as Edelman claims that they subtly do, they would be doing their jobs competently.

Take news coverage of military conflict. Do not the media pay obsessive attention to individual soldiers who are “making a difference” in Iraq? Or who are killed there? Or who tortured an Iraqi prisoner? Or who are now running for Congress to “change the mindset” in Washington? Do the media not lavish coverage on individual acts of terrorism that kill a few people on a given day, rather than on who is training and funding the terrorists and on what motivates them—let alone on aggregate troop movements and the structure and strategy of counterinsurgency efforts? Obviously such examples post-date Edelman’s death, but parallel questions surely could have been asked about media coverage of the Vietnam war. The idea that the news media focus on abstract, intractable forces rather than individual actions and personalities is, at the very least, something Edelman should have done more than assert.

Edelman (1988, 97) claims that “the reiteration in patriotic oratory and grade school civics lessons that the people control the government comes to be recognized as a way of insuring support for government actions people dislike and over which they exercise no effective control.” But he provides no convincing evidence that the people’s help-

lessness “comes to be recognized” by *them*, as opposed to by Edelman, and certainly not that this helplessness flows from the news media’s concentration on vast unstoppable forces rather than individuals, whether heroic or dastardly.

Edelman’s Non-Elitist Analysis of Elites

Edelman concluded that the common voter now has a more difficult task when attempting to evaluate contemporary rulers than during prior periods of American history. Edelman (1964, 76) claimed that

an incumbent and his constituents today are organizationally and psychologically separated from each other to a degree that is far more divisive than the . . . separation characteristic of the nineteenth century. . . . Those who cared could more easily reach an accurate opinion on the implications for their own interest of the Louisiana Purchase or strict construction of the Constitution than we can reach on the implications for our interest of a decision to test nuclear bombs in the atmosphere, raise the national debt limit, or sell a large bloc of stock in a point-to-point space communication corporation to the American Telephone and Telegraph Company.

Thus, although modern democracies constantly celebrate their citizens’ opportunities for personal agency, reflection on the complicated political realities that modern voters are trying to understand makes it difficult not to “despair of . . . a complex, cold, and bewildering world,” a world that “can be neither understood nor influenced” by the individual. This situation ironically creates a demand for “attachment to reassuring abstract symbols rather than to one’s own efforts” (Edelman 1964, 76).

Edelman clearly recognized that expanding levels of social complexity both magnify the power and diminish the actual, if not the perceived, legitimacy of political elites. Specifically, in a highly interconnected and specialized industrial economy, members of the electorate, or anyone else for that matter, are generally incapable of clearly perceiving the effects of political attempts at social-economic regulation (cf. Friedman 2005). Rather, what is observable to members of society is “the incumbent of a high position who knows what to do and is willing to act, especially when others are bewildered and alone . . . [and] whose actions can be interpreted as beneficent, whether it is because

they are demonstrably beneficent or because their consequences are unknowable” (Edelman 1964, 76). Political elites may be able to capitalize upon the fact that “it is apparently intolerable for men to admit the key role of accident, of ignorance, and of unplanned processes in their affairs”: in that context, “the leader serves a vital function by personifying and reifying the process. . . . Incumbents of high public office therefore become objects of acclaim for the satisfied, scapegoats for the unsatisfied, and symbols of aspirations or of whatever is opposed.”

Indeed, in contemporary societies,

the term “leader” evokes an ideal type which high public officials try to construct themselves to fit. . . . Regardless of the consequences of officials’ actions, *which contemporaries cannot know*, the ability to create oneself as the ideal type maintains followings. . . . The leader must be constructed as innovator, as accepting responsibility for governmental actions, as possessing qualities that followers lack. (Edelman 1988, 40, *emph. added.*)

Edelman thus maintains that the nature of knowledge in complex modern societies has led to the creation of a new type of leadership, whose power “depends . . . upon the *impossibility* of demonstrating success or failure. . . . The clue to what is politically effective is to be found not so much in verifiable good or bad effects flowing from political acts as in whether the incumbent can continue indefinitely to convey the impression of knowing *what* is to be done” (Edelman 1964, 76-77, *emph. added.*). Such leaders, who are judged by their effectiveness at “getting things done” (bills passed, agencies created, appropriations increased) rather than by the effect of those “things” on the problems they are supposed to solve, gain power and popular approval for their visible personal qualities because voters find it so difficult to perceive the consequences, beneficial or deleterious, stemming from the actual decisions leaders make.

However, there is something too self-conscious about Edelman’s account. It is not as if voters recognize that they don’t know the consequences of the policies that their leaders support, but support them nonetheless, taking comfort from the reassuring symbols offered by their leaders. Rather, one of the most disturbing things about ignorance is that, almost by definition, it is difficult to recognize what we are ignorant of. It seems more plausible, then, that voters are not even aware that their judgments regarding the efficacy of public policies are de-

rived from the impressions of *personal* efficacy that political leaders cultivate, rather than from the true efficacy of the policies themselves. When voters cannot directly perceive the effects of policies, it may never occur to them that they are basing their evaluations on the things that they *do* see—whether inevitably selective media imagery that creates the impression of directly observing consequences, or symbolic problem solving by leaders whose “fights for the common man” are so visible—and that these simulacra may have nothing to do with “real conditions.”

Perhaps none of this should be troubling, though, since it may mean that we are being governed by an expert elite rather than a mass of ignoramuses. Edelman, however, suggests that bureaucratic government is often used, not to harness impartial expertise, but to aid politicians’ manipulation of mass impressions of the need for, and efficacy of, government action. Indeed, because of our inability to directly perceive the effects of public decisions, elites can use “impartial” social scientists to “construct tests that show success, just as their opponents construct other tests that show failure.” Far from ensuring “better” public administration, such experts mask the inherently ambiguous effects of public policies behind their “studies.” This needn’t be a process by which true experts are deliberately overridden on the issues of their expertise by craven bureaucrats: the “experts” own “judgments also hinge upon interpretation and upon ideological definitions of the issues” (Edelman 1988, 40–41; cf Tetlock 2005).

In the space of a few pages, Edelman has, in effect, provided here a plausible hypothesis about the trend toward executive centralization, a hypothesis based neither on Progressive ideology nor rational-choice theory (as in, e.g., Hofstadter 1960, Galambos 1970, Skowronek 1982, and Carpenter 2001). In his view, the expanding executive state’s enlistment of social scientists during the Progressive era was not necessarily an attempt to draw on the newly created social sciences’ “expertise” in the task of identifying and solving social problems. Rather, the enlistment of social scientists may have resulted from public officials’ recognition that such “experts” could provide putative “proof” of the existence of social problems and the effectiveness of proposed or implemented solutions, placing a scientific veneer upon the newly created national regulatory state. An unintended consequence of the opaque effects of public policies may have been the desperate need to believe that there were learned specialists who could tell us as much about social and economic as about biological “pathologies.”

Edelman's Ideological Blinders

The difficulty of knowing the true consequences of leaders' actions might have another unintended effect. It may undermine Edelman's objection to the centralization of political power, since we have no way of knowing a priori whether bad consequences follow from this trend. The "social scientists'" expertise may be largely spurious, but how do we know that their competence in producing sound public policy is inferior to that of the ignorant masses?

Edelman fails to consider the issue, diverted by his maddening political complacency. On the very page that follows his functionalist analysis of the grounding of "expertise" in the epistemic problems of regulating complicated societies, Edelman (1988, 42) launches into an indictment of the Reagan presidency as an example of how

domestic policies that are ruinous to many can similarly be accepted as evidence of effective leadership. Economic policies in the 1980s that helped destroy a high proportion of America's manufacturing industries and farms and sharply increased unemployment, apparently permanently, became evidence of resolute and innovative economic change and helped reelect Reagan overwhelmingly in 1984 with the strong support of many of the farmers, workers, and managers who were displaced. Civil rights and affirmative action policies helped win popularity for Kennedy and Johnson in the sixties, and obstruction or repeal of the same policies helped win popularity for Reagan in the eighties. The explanation for these seemingly paradoxical reactions lies, again, in the inevitable ambiguities that pervade beliefs about the consequences of official actions.

Thus, just after he recognizes that it may often be simply impossible to determine the effects of many public policies, we have Edelman blaming the Reagan administration for a permanent increase in unemployment. Where is his famous skepticism, when it comes to the sources of information on which we (even he) all base our judgments of policy effects?

Those looking for rigor may find it difficult to justify working through Edelman's writings when such complacency repeatedly intrudes upon otherwise trenchant analyses of modern politics. Unfortunately, and perhaps more troublesome, such examples suggest that Edelman never seems to have recognized that the main line of his arguments might put in jeopardy his own political commitments. As

Karl Mannheim (1946, 249) observed, since ideological bias is typically “perceived only in the thought of the opponent,” there is an inherent “subconscious reluctance to think out the implications of a concretely formulated insight to a point where the theoretical formulations latent in it would be clear enough to have a disquieting effect on one’s own position.” For example, Edelman notes that Herbert Hoover might have been unfairly assigned responsibility for the Great Depression. Yet Edelman then goes on to note that the cause of this calamity was probably “business mismanagement, mindless stock market speculation, and the inherent risks of finance capitalism.” This is to substitute the platitudes of liberal academic convention (at least the platitudes commonplace outside of economics departments) for careful scholarly analysis.

Had Edelman recognized the problem, however, what could he have done about it? Even without adopting the extreme skepticism sometimes implied in his writings about the difficulty of understanding a complex world, what choice have we, or he, but to rely on putative experts’ judgments in areas in which we cannot judge for ourselves?

Edelman must be ranked alongside Walter Lippmann as an analyst of the epistemological basis of public political ignorance. But Lippmann’s elitist solutions were not options for Edelman, who recognized that experts can be as deluded as members of the public. That Edelman himself may have suffered ideological delusions is of small consequence compared to the implication that he had no choice in the matter.

Indeed, although his own writings are often biased by his political commitments, Edelman recognized that his arguments could be turned against themselves. Reflecting on this problem, Edelman (1988, 4) noted that

relativism is unsettling. It leaves us without a reassuring test of what is real and of who we are; and relativist propositions cannot be verified or falsified in the positivist sense because they pose the Mannheim Paradox problem: observers who postulate that the meanings of observations vary with the social situation or with something else must take the same skeptical and tentative position with respect to their own relativism.

Unfortunately, Edelman did not take his own recommendation seriously enough, and was thus unable to fully develop the radical critique of *all* mass politics (not just conservative varieties) that could

emerge from his analysis of the elite control of information and political symbolism in modern democracies.

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