Performance in Political Communication
By Jacob Liedke

Past personal social interactions determine how an individual will react to their environments throughout life. These interactions evoke human beliefs about what leads us to discontent or satisfaction. This process creates individual pseudo-environments, or a subjective, biased mental image of the world. In these pseudo-environments we individually create understandings of the world around us and use these as a 'jumping off point' to form our ideologies, gender identities, and personalities in the real world. A mixture of influences from our society's shared constructions and our personal pseudo-environments affect how we perform as humans. Walter Lippmann uses the example of a woman in the United States imaging what war is like in France. Although she has never gone to France, nor has she seen the battlefield, she is able to "see" what she thinks the war looks like through her "mind's eye," a result of repeated social interactions and the creation of ideas within the pseudo environment.[1] Lippmann claims that it is the way in which we imagine the world that determines how we will act at any point. Our views on issues such as radical Islamism in the Middle East or the governmental regulations implemented to help American farmers, as well how we then decide to act, is the result of social construction molded by historical and cultural happenings. As humans, we are constantly putting on a performance within society, whether it's through the clothes we wear or the political ideologies we act upon.[2] Humans in the 21st century are constantly surrounded by performativity in the individual, societal, and political spheres of life.

[1] Walter Lippmann, *Public opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), 1-66.
[2] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the self in everyday life* (London: Allen Lane, 1956).

Pankaj Mishra often writes about the developing feelings of anger and resentment felt by men across the world, and the courses of action they choose to take.3 4 Mishra's dissection of these views reveals how far we've strayed from the age of reason into the age of anger. His writings show how social constructs and institutions have paved the way for the pockets of machismo and misogyny we see today. These pockets of "humiliated" men note the advance of women in society and the prominence of feminist theory as factors in the denigration of their respective societies. Through the experiences these men have had within their pseudo-environments, they perform and act upon the raw irrational emotion they are feeling. Just as the personalities and individual decisions of these men have been influenced by various historical developments and institutions, the works of philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler are also the result of the experiences and interactions within her pseudo-environment. Butler theorizes that gender is not a stable identity but is instead constituted in time as a stylized repetition of acts.5 She also holds herself in steep opposition of how the gendered self is portrayed in traditional phenomenological models. Instead, she writes that acts constitute the identity of the individual. This constitution therefore is a main factor in the performance of the self's gender. As Butler paraphrased Simone de Beauvoir, the body is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation. Similar to the role of performance in dramatizing an individual's gender identity, the political spectacle is largely one of dramaturgy and theatrics in which preceding interactions inspire decisions, identities, and views. In every level of politics, actors make policy decisions and choose courses of action based on their social

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3 Pankaj Mishra, "Welcome to the age of anger,*"* The Guardian, 8 December 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/dec/08/welcome-age-anger-brexit-trump.

4 Pankaj Mishra, "The crisis in modern masculinity*"*, The Guardian, 17 March 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/17/the-crisis-in-modern-masculinity

5 Judith Butler, Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, Theatre Journal, Vol. 40, No. 4. (Dec., 1988), pp. 519-531.

interactions and therefore how their pseudo-environments develop. In the specific cases of performance and performativity above and in the political world especially, performances often reinforce certain institutions (i.e. voting in democratic elections, consistently supporting the same political party, debating the opposition). By instilling a common history on a group of people, societal institutions influence how a group experiences commonality among its peoples while simultaneously encouraging opposition and debate.

The performativity of human beings is exemplified through our transformation from a rational Enlightened society into one marked by anger and resentment. For the centuries leading up to the Scientific Revolution and subsequent Enlightenment, human actions were heavily dictated by the norms of society instilled by the Catholic Church. However, after the European Wars of Religion, people sought to become skeptical of the institutions set up by the Church. Rather than developing judgement through blind faith, Enlightenment philosophers developed the scientific method and made knowledgeable conclusions based on observable facts and reason.[6] Enlightenment economic and political philosophers also concluded that rational thought was the foundation for all individual behavior. In the years following the Enlightenment, democratic capitalist societies became synonymous with Enlightened thought based on the rationality of the human being. In corroboration with these institutions, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman assert that "explanations and predictions of people's choices, in everyday life as well as in the social sciences, are often founded on the assumption of human rationality."[7]

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[6]Jessie Szalay, "What Was the Enlightenment?", LiveScience, 7 July 2016. https://www.livescience.com/55327-the-enlightenment.html

[7] Daniel Kahneman & Amos Tversky, "The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice," *Science* 211, no. 4481 (1981): 453-458.

However, after decades of these democratic capitalist institutions at work, people have abandoned rationality and are thinking and therefore, performing differently.

Feelings of bitterness and irritability towards the institutions in place have spawned irrational thought and action in the past few years. Developments like Brexit and the 2016 election of Donald Trump are causing people to scratch their heads and ask, "How did we get here?" Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk portray some seemingly frightening developments in the Western world. In the post-Soviet era, democracy and capitalism were viewed as the ideal institutions to lead people away from the dangers of communism and authoritarianism. However, Foa and Mounk's data reveal that an alarming number of people in the West are becoming dissatisfied with democracy and are seeking other alternatives. The data from the World Value Surveys shows that almost a quarter of the people surveyed ages 16-24, in the United States, answered that "having a democratic political system" is a "bad" or "very bad" way to "run this country."[8]

Marked by the feelings of animosity towards a dysfunctional democracy in the United States, Mishra writes that we have abandoned rationality in thought and transitioned into developing thoughts and our performances on irrational thought and what Friedrich Nietzsche referred to as "ressentiment", "a whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts."[9] As disparities in class, education, and race grow, it might seem apparent to some that this is the reason for such pent-up anger and irrational thought. However, our dependence on economics as a way of comparing, contrasting, and discussing people might

[8] Roberto Stefan Foa & Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation," *Journal of Democracy* Volume 27, Issue 3 (2016): 4-17.
[9]Ian Buchanan, "ressentiment," In *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*: Oxford University Press, 2010. http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-604.

have had something to do with such performances. Mishra writes, "Yet a mechanistic and

materialist way of conceiving human actions has become entrenched, in part because economics

has become the predominant means of understanding the world." However, when a flawed

market is viewed as the ideal form of human interaction, flawed performances will come from it.

He also claims that it is our dependence on this rigid neoliberal model of economics that has

made us so obsessed with what can be counted and neglect what cannot: subjective emotion.

Emotion however is fundamentally expressive. Thus, the suppression of the emotions felt by

these men across the world plays into a cycle characterized by feelings of resentment and toxic

hypermasculinity.

Mishra traces the modern history of what he calls a "global crisis of masculinity."[10] A

sort of continuation of his 2016 "Welcome to the age of anger," the essayist details the recent

history of gender relations, focusing on the evolution of male indignation towards the opposite

sex. He quotes Elaine Showalter's "Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle" in

portraying the feelings of men as far back as the 19th century. Showalter writes that the modest

gains of feminists caused "fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border

controls around the definition of gender" amongst some men.[11] Mishra claims that it is this

blurring of borders, loss of identity, and growth of ego within some males that has caused such

feelings of anger. He begins "The crisis of modern masculinity" with some references to the

toxic masculinity and chauvinism on the rise in India, first explaining to the reader that

Mohandas Gandhi's assassin was motivated by various ideologies. His assassin, Nathuram

Godse, claimed that it was Gandhi's efforts to emasculate Hinduism through womanly politics

[10] Mishra, "The crisis in modern masculinity."
[11] Elaine Showalter, *Sexual anarchy: gender and culture at the fin de siècle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991)

that pushed him to kill him. Decades later, Godse is a hero in an India riddled by Hindu

chauvinists inspired by European fascism. In the Western world, Mishra writes that masculinity

has devolved into "post-9/11 cocksmanship" and a "frenetic pursuit of masculinity,"[12] due to a

myriad of external and internal factors. Statements by radical Islamists about the emasculation

of American manhood, as well as the progression of the status of women, members of the

LGBTQ+, and other minorities in the West has caused some men to feel like their identities and

status are being threatened. As a result, the pseudo-environments of these masochistic

chauvinists cause them to develop hateful ideologies and perspectives of the world. Like in the

case of Godse, some who develop said radical ideologies decide to act upon them and perform

their beliefs in the real world.

A further explanation of performance at the individual level and within the political

spectacle can be found in Lippmann's "Public Opinion." He considers that for each individual

decision that is made, "some view of the facts is taken to be conclusive, some view of the

circumstances is accepted as the basis of inference and as the stimulus of feeling." Lippmann

describes the case of American congressmen being notified about the deployment of American

soldiers by the British against Italian forces. However, even prior to checking if the event

actually occurred, the congressmen relied on their partisanship and ideologies to then develop

courses of action. For both sides, "the reaction is instantaneous." "The fiction is taken as the

truth because the fiction is badly needed."[13] Days later, it was revealed that not only did the

British Government not deploy the American soldiers, but we weren't fighting the Italians either.

In actuality, the Marines had landed at the request of the Italian government to help protect

Italian civilians. They were not at war with Italy but instead "acted according to an established

[12] Mishra, "The crisis in modern masculinity."
[13] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 3-23.

international practice which had nothing to do with the League of Nations." Prior to this

information reaching the congressmen in Washington, they already developed their own mental

images of what occurred. Their political ideologies and views on the League of Nations

determined how they pictured what had happened and thus, how they would act if the original

story was true.

Lippmann also touches on how we as a society make our decisions, and how our outlook

on this process might be invalid. He quotes G.K. Chesterton in that the fundamental belief

within our society that people will think differently yet act the same way is a "doubtful

speculation." He asserts that this methodology includes the belief that the foundation of society

isn't based on communion or convention, but coincidence. To explain this belief even further to

the reader, Chesterton uses an example of four men gathering under a lamp post. The four of

them might all convene under the lamp post for different reasons but to expect them to do this

every night is "unwise."[14] Lippmann then asks the reader to substitute the four men with

national governments, political parties, trade unions, etc. According to him, they are not so

different. He writes that the belief that these groups or institutions will repeatedly act rationally

or at least consistently, is severely flawed. Whether the action is rational or irrational,

performance permeates all levels of society, especially in constructing the political spectacle.

Murray Edelman analyzes how many elements of the political world are socially

constructed. When discussing the constructions and use of social problems, Edelman mentions

social issues that become "longer lasting instances."[15] Normally stemming from ideologies, he

writes that these problems and their corollary performances become so ingrained in society that

[14] G. K. Chesterton, "The Mad Hatter and the Sane Householder," Vanity Fair, Jan. 1921, p. 54.

[15] Murray J. Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 1-66.

"they are not recognized as ideological at all but accepted as the way the world is constituted." We see this repeatedly with cases of hypermasculinity and chauvinism in recent years. Men who are socialized to view women, the LGBTQ+ community, or other minorities as inferior will lash out against those pushing for equal rights. Edelman's writing exemplifies the role of performance in problem construction. He writes that the historical failure to seek remedies for social issues is the result of a "pervasive contradiction," a problem to some might be a benefit to others. Therefore, the group that benefits from social issues actively performs in a way that influences the persistence and severity of issues.

In addition to discussing how ideologies toward problems turn into performances, Edelman also examines how our ambivalent understandings of the world translate into how we view and perform our ideologies. Edelman writes that conflicting cues about the meanings of governmental actions "create ambiguity about the social world that readily transforms into ambivalence and acquiescence respecting public policy. However, Edelman doesn't view this ambivalence as an issue to society. Rather, he views it as the cause for opposition in a society. "Ambivalence doesn't yield indecisiveness...it provides support for the regime and for the challenges to the regime."[16] Edelman writes that contradictions in experiences, or what Lippmann referred to as our pseudo-environments, encourage contradictions in our political performances. Although Edelman discusses the creation of this opposition, he views it as being necessary to a functioning society. Stressing the importance of a ritualized exchange of opposing views, he writes that rebellion and revolution normally do not ferment in societies in which this exchange is prevalent. On the contrary, "where such exchanges have been lacking, so that a consensus on common action to oust the regime is easily built." Edelman also highlights

[16] ibid, 1-66.

how the transition from ideas in the 'pseudo-environment' into the real world are involved in the construction of authorities. He considers the influence that social problems have on claims to authority. "Military threats, crime, mental illness, illiteracy, and every other problem yield claim to authority…" However, because every person claiming authority is coming from a pseudo-environment with individually specific experiences, the claims to authority, and thus, ideas for courses of action, will be disputed.

Edelman's writing regarding the construction of political leaders heavily emphasizes the role of performance in leadership. According to Edelman, "the central connotation of "leadership" is innovation: leaders point the way so that others can emulate their initiatives." On the other hand, he also writes that "leaders emerge and maintain their positions only when they embrace current fashions and beliefs." Edelman addresses this contradiction as illuminating the phenomenon of leadership. While leaders win acclaim for fashionable courses of action, their followers "win reassurance" and reaffirm their accepted ideologies.[17] Thus, perpetuating a cycle of leader-civilian political performance.

Humans are naturally performative beings. We perform emotions through facial expressions and body language. We perform our gender identity. We perform our political ideologies through democratic institutions. However, the ways in which we choose to perform and display ourselves to those around us is the product of experiences and developments that make up our pseudo-environments. This repeated social interaction causes us to develop a view of the world, unique to the individual. Although people's ideas are generated in this fictitious pseudo-environment, they portray their ideologies and personalities in the real world through performance. Foa, Mounk, and Mishra's articles highlighted the potential dangers of this.

[17] ibid, 1-66.

People across the world are becoming increasingly bitter and resentful because of the influences of various institutions on their pseudo-environments. As a result, they are taking these emotions and performing them in the real world, potentially endangering others. Lippmann and Edelman however discuss how performance plays into the social construction of our modern political spectacle. Both authors explore the relationship between the performance of actions and various components of politics, including the construction of public opinion, social problems, and authority figures. Performances throughout society are a key part in the generation and distribution of information for the purpose of cultural, historical, and political change. The role of performance in our society is a central component in the study of political communication.

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