

ALL MONICA ALL THE TIME: CROWDING OUT THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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INTRODUCTION

Five years ago we wrote a book titled *Postmodern Public Administration* (1995) which, in chapter three, outlined the postmodern condition. The following essay may be regarded as a revisiting of that problematic. As a generalization we are not pleased—things have gotten worse; they have not improved. Such a position is not exceptional, indeed we fear that whatever insights we bring to bear are little more profound than CNN's Sunday show: *Reliable Sources*, with Howard Kurts and Bernard Kalb. Still, our analysis has always been informed by postmodern political philosophy. So, perhaps added depth can be claimed because we are grounded in insights of thinkers with funny-sounding names.

So, what can we add beyond the commonplace observations that there is a proliferation of media sources, a collapsing of entertainment with news, a further collapsing of tabloid news and "straight" elite news; the credentialing of talking heads hoping for celebrity status juxtaposed against "serious" journalists, perhaps also hoping for the same status.

THE CONCEPTS OF HYPERREALITY

To answer the above questions let us first examine those concepts that cluster around the notion of hyperreality. What is reality? What is truth?

To utter "hyperreality" is to imply a "reality" against which it is counterposed. In our view this "reality" would be the life-world or *lebenswelt*, the flux and flow of everyday life. Getting up, performing our toilette, eating, bundling children off to school, driving to work, working with colleagues, bantering, and so on. Hyperreality is a simulacra of reality (i. e. multiplying copies of no original) or a simulation of

reality. In other words, hyperreality floats away from the life-world in a realm of the free play of signifiers and signs. Free play because the signs need not have any relationship to life-worlds. And they relate more to each other than they do to life-world language games. The signs release themselves from particular and practical language games used in the life-world to communicate and get things done through organized effort.

In a profound sense, hyperreality is more “real” than life-worlds. The accident that happened to you is less real than the one filmed for “news at 11.” The criminal act that victimized you is less real than those filmed for the program “cops.” The celebrated murder of JonBenet Ramsey is a simulation of thousands of murdered children who were not singled out for celebrity because of cuteness and class deficits.

Consider also the proliferation of theme parks (Colonial Williamsburg advertises itself as an “authentic” reproduction) and roadside attractions. McDonalds, Burger Kings and etc. are simulacra of the unique localized “greasy spoons” that they replaced. Orlando and Las Vegas are monuments to simulated “worlds;” pirates, Egyptians, porpoises, jousting medieval knights—what spectacles of hyperreality; what food for the imagination; coming soon gloves and goggles of virtual reality.

Hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1983) has several analogues. Our own term has been “self-referential epiphenomenalism.” Quite a mouthful we admit. Epiphenomenal means beyond the phenomena, beyond that which appears to immediate perception and consciousness. An analogy is the exhaust from an engine which cannot be perceived while the roar and effects of the engine working can be. Self referential refers to epiphenomena that relate to each other without ever touching down to life-world phenomena.

We have also coined the term “plastic disposable reifications.” By this we mean a rapid succession of simulacra, simulations, and hyper-real signs. And their confusion. Willie Horton is a plastic disposable reification—a reification first of Dukakis’ penal policy and then a symbol of Republican wedge issue campaign strategy. Similarly, resonances may be subsumed under this admittedly squishy category. Dukakis was painted as a “card carrying member of the ACLU.” Of course, the ACLU is a perfectly legitimate organization that insists on first amendment privileges and other things. They work through the legitimated court system. “Card carrying” though resonates as card carrying member of the Communist party from the McCarthy era. Similarly, the

phrase “end welfare as we know it,” resonates in the cultural iconography “the end of civilization as we know it.” “Plastic” then connotes malleability. O. J. as a sign, for instance, metamorphosed from great athlete, to amiable pitch man, to murderer. “Disposable” refers to the fact in hyperreality that these signs come and go but there is always one or more of them floating through it. “Reification” in the lexicon of political philosophy means a construct that does not capture a “natural” phenomenon but is taken as doing just that. The concept of sovereignty, for instance, was invented by political philosophers to replace the concept of “divine right of kings.” Then, as “democracy” evolved, it was thought to apply to the sovereign people. No one, to take an empiricist stance for the moment, has ever seen or felt “sovereignty.”

All of these terms refer to phenomena peculiar to or exacerbated by, postmodernity. To be sure, American history is replete with examples of bad faith character assassination, extreme partisanship and what we call conflated aggregations. Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, for instance, were pilloried for what their opponents thought to be character flaws of themselves or their significant others (and perhaps the opponents were correct). By “conflated aggregation” we mean confusing small things appropriately parsed separately with another larger thing. This is similar to the concept of synecdoche, in which one particular aspect of a thing stands in for the whole thing (e. g. get your butt out of here). No better example is the campaign to pass prohibition. Drinking even beer was associated with immigrants, working class men, and un-American morals; not unlike the current campaign for “family values,” a conflated aggregation that gathers up under its pleasant, albeit nostalgic, sign the attack on gays and lesbians, abortion rights, extra marital sex and even divorce. In the case of prohibition the Christian right won one for a while. Of course, legal prohibition did not mean the absence of alcohol.

Now, philosophers of an analytic bent will be driven crazy by, we admit, the mushy, squishy, overlapping nature of these tropes. But, in our defense, we are not trying to pin down stable eternal or tautological truth. In concert with postmodernists in general ours is a close to the ground narrative interpretation. Other words may be available like: symbolic politics or the politics of distraction—but we judge these to be too tepid. And, of course, in our field the term “symbolic politics” has a rather specific meaning developed by Murray Edelman as in, for instance, the lofty rhetoric of preambles to legislative acts while in the body special interests are served.

So, we persist in urging a postmodern vocabulary to describe many contemporary political phenomena. One of the authors of this piece used just such a vocabulary to describe the apparent contradictions in Vice-President Gore's "National Performance Review," and the ten step self-help book *Reinventing Government* (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) that inspired it (Fox, 1996). Other examples abound. Political strategies in postmodernity is a fruitful field. We witness spinners spinning spin. This leads to resentful and petulant relationships between elected officials contributing to gridlock. "Who shut down the government?" "Who is the bulwark against attacks on social security and medicare?" "Who is demagoguing the issue?" Then, of course, there are all the campaign advertisement techniques of contemporary political campaigns—negative multilayered voice, headlines, out of context quotes and morphing the candidate into some more symbolically hateful political figure. Beyond the wedge issues exploited by Republican campaign guru Lee Atwater we now have campaigns specifically designed to lower voter turnout.

The latest example of conflated aggregations are the symbols being tossed out in to hyperspace for the presidential campaigns of the year 2000. George W. Bush calls himself a "compassionate conservative." This is the morphing of opposites. Whatever your ideology conservatism means, if anything at all, a bias towards liberty and individual responsibility—you are on your own and it is good for you. How does the normally Democratic commitment to compassion, safety nets, protection from irrational market forces fit with that? Gore, on the same hand, touts his "practical idealism" —clearly another conflated aggregation. See, any two words can grammatically, if not logically, be put together. What can it mean to be idealistic and simultaneously be practical?

Similar phrases are floated that have so many meanings that they are incapable of communicating any concrete life-world meaning. "Economic development," for instance can, according to the hearer, mean smoke stack chasing, tax breaks, investment into physical infrastructure or increased "investment" in educating children. Likewise, the buzz word in social sciences is "civil society." Again, depending on the hearer, this can mean Bush senior's "a thousand points of light." By that meaning government can do load shedding of social services on private charities. Or, it can mean the fundamental resistance of the people as in Checkoslovakia's velvet revolution. Or it can mean deeply held Goffman-like cultural norms (recursive practices).

SOCIAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO HYPERREALITY

So, again, we think that the current situation is of a different magnitude. The postmodern economy is different from the modern one. Our current economy has been variously described as postindustrial, third wave, and information based. From an economy primarily rooted in the production of material goods we have evolved to one based on the manipulation of symbols. The paradigm case of the workplace has shifted from the production floor and assembly line to the office. In this situation one's level of education is much more important than it was in the past. This is good for us college professors (symbolic manipulators). Further, the duty of Americans is more to consume than to produce. To encourage this, credit is issued—buy now pay later, immediate rather than delayed gratification is socially acceptable. I shop therefore I am.

Concomitant changes occur in family structure: high divorce rates, families of mixed lineage, a proliferation of households with single heads. There has been a decline in neighborhood cohesion and such other intermediary institutions of civil society as unions and political parties. Centrifugal forces trump centripetal ones. Other factors, in less broad strokes, contributing to hyperreality follow.

First, there is a proliferation of "news" sources. In addition to the network broadcasts we now have cable and satellite sources 24 hours a day. All hungry for material that will boost their ratings and advertising revenue. Newly anointed talking heads scream at each other with little progress or comity about the "issues" they are supposedly "discussing;" "Firing Line" is the model for these proliferating, inauthentic and uninformative pseudo dialogues. For instance, celebrity Charles Grodin has now become a talk host "journalist." Sports reporters become constitutional scholars. Moreover, the exponential expansion of internet sources transcending (which is to say ignoring) journalistic standards like dual sourcing further confuses. Matt Drudge comes to mind.

Another factor that strikes us is the collapsing of hard news coverage with entertainment: info-tainment. Morning and evening "news" magazines mix willy nilly news, weather, health, celebrity interviews, and movie, book and TV sitcoms plugs. Jovial weathermen go outside to work the crowd of folks (tourists) from wide and far, with only a tip of the hat toward actual weather reports. Important guests with policy perspectives are impelled to talk in sound bites for the 60 seconds they get to describe their initiatives. One of your authors has seen Ralph Nader, Dick Cheney, Robert Reich, Jerry Brown, Alan Simpson and many others treated this way. But the main thing is that they are all

jumbled together: "coming up next after this," is the most common transition (not exactly a literary or academic one); no order, no ranking, no linearity. Those conducting these shows are handsome, pretty, or perky. They are nothing more than platforms for corporate advertisers and they make millions a piece to perform that function. Similarly, consider the jostling crowds of microphones and cameras handled by aggressive news entrepreneurs with crews pulling satellite trailers; chaos and madness to get to some celebrity. Then, there is the paparazzi chasing candidates or residents in hyperreality: O. J., Diana, Jackie and etc.

A third closely related contextual development relates to the entertainment industry. One could easily come to the conclusion that Hollywood and TV sitcoms and soaps have always been a part of hyperreality. But older films tended to affirm "family values." Married couples slept in separate beds with the armor of padded pajamas. No nudity, no extra-marital sex; no drinking, no drugs; *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best* vs *Seinfeld* (casual sex, nothing really matters). These changes are signatures of the postmodern condition. Think then about the evolution or even disjunction between 40s and 50s movies and those of today.

Modern films, as a generalization, had clear cut characters: good guys and bad guys, white hats and black hats, and heroes and villains. They have happy endings, plot tension and resolution, morality and American values are affirmed. The hero gets the girl, marries her and they live happily ever after. Postmodern films are different. Characters are more ambiguous. They are both good and bad. Consider *Natural Born Killers*; Mick and Mallory are celebrity serial killers. At one point Mick portrays himself as the grim reaper and justifies his killings by saying "ain't nobody innocent," everybody is fair game for random death. There is no higher morality, no real sense of right and wrong, no rhyme nor reason in the universe. Similarly, *Pulp Fiction* is a postmodern film. It doesn't have a linear plot. It features, rather, a loosely connected cluster of scenes of random violence.

Fifth we are inundated with commercial messages for a myriad of products, including political candidates. Virtually all of these are exercises in symbolic manipulation rather than the transformation of information. Tums has calcium so presumably one can simultaneously relieve heartburn and prevent osteoporosis. If you buy the right car you can become a car seat. More air space is consumed by the birth date of beer and how best to relieve acid indigestion, than the potential crisis of medicare. We think that this proliferation of quarter truths

accompanied by spin makes the populous cynical about all attempts at authentic communication. Why worry about whether Clinton lied or committed perjury when there are so few messages received by hearers of anything that is not like that. Lying, dissembling and prevarication are as American as handgun possession.

We believe that another contextual factor is related to the criminal "justice" system. Prosecutors have been given, over the last 20 years, incredible discretion, so much so that whether one becomes grist for the mill of criminal "justice" is largely a matter of negative lottery luck. It is not true as the cliché would have it that "it's a free country." Judges' discretion is constrained by determinant sentencing laws so prosecutors set the sentence by adjusting the charge. With this power they can get those who come under their purview to testify against others (whether actually guilty or not). There has been considerable slippage in the standards of due process of law. Conspiracy laws passed for the seemingly justifiable cause of reigning in the Mafia are now part of an expanding repertoire of prosecutorial weapons against any group that they choose. Spitting on the sidewalk is a misdemeanor, conspiracy to do so is a felony. Similarly, to fight the dastardly drug dealers, we gave preemptory power to law enforcement agencies to confiscate property suspected of being used in the drug trade, whether by the traders themselves or property of innocent relatives or associates. In other words, in our zeal to combat drugs we relinquish the constitutional prohibition against confiscation of property without due process of law. Then, property holders of that which has been impounded, must prove that the property was not being used for illicit traffic, thus reversing the presumption of innocence. One can even be prosecuted and jailed for lying to a federal official about something that would not otherwise warrant prosecution.

The point of all this is that truth takes a back seat to societal vengeance against whosoever prosecutors or law enforcement agents regard as "other." Thus do events like Ruby Ridge occur. Without proper procedural due process of law, criminal justice pulled along behind such phrases as "three strikes and you're out," "zero tolerance," and the "war on drugs," enters the realm of randomness and hyperreality.

Finally there is politics and public policy. Many politicians, especially Reagan and Clinton, are more celebrities than they are traditional politicians and policy negotiators and promulgators. Reagan, under the direction of stage manager Michael Deaver is known for rhetorical flourishes: "evil empire," "tear down this wall," "morning in America,"

"get government off your back and out of your pocket." These are not policy proposals. They are "feel good" signs and symbols. Similarly, Clinton has had memorable moments: "end welfare as we know it," "the era of big government is over," "comeback kid," "I feel your pain," and "mistakes were made," presumably by no one in particular. These plastic disposable reifications are not attached to specific policy legislation. Even welfare reform is problematic what with waivers, disability payments, school lunch eligibility, food stamps for immigrants and so on. Lately the White House has dribbled out symbolic policy proposals that look like Clinton is paying attention to the needs of the people: school refurbishing, school teachers, school uniforms, cops on the streets, save the environment without confiscating my sports utility vehicle; a policy *de jour* delivered in front of appropriately assembled and admiring target groups. And, of course, all have been pre-tested by polling and focus groups by campaign professionals.

The spectacle, we believe, is crowding out life-world problem solving. Untold amounts of news space and air space are taken up by trivial aspects of hyperreality. Has the female prosecutor changed her hair style? Was Judge Ito too lenient? It was reported that the sales figures of white Broncos went up dramatically after the famous freeway parade. What did Princess Di represent? Motherhood? Volunteerism? More likely, she is famous for being famous. Upon her death a feeding frenzy of crass commercialism produced simulacra of her image. Elton John dusted off an old song about another icon of hyperreality Norma Jean; it vaulted to the top of the charts. Flower shops got rich. Next up, anniversary notices. As we write Monica and the president fill the void. Thong underwear, cigars, phone sex, Larry Flynt, the blue dress and a cast of hundreds titillate. The point is that if it were not for Monica we would invent a simulation to feed the maw of talking heads. There is always something to puff up beyond any sense of proportionality. Jon Benet Ramsey, the trial of an *au pair*, the beating to death of a young gay man, and Waco.

Another distraction is the reporting of politics as a horse race: who's ahead?; who's behind?; what do the polls indicate?; who is spinning what; what is the expectations game?; who is ahead in campaign war chests? And these stories go on and on. They begin anew after each election: Iowa, New Hampshire, long Congressional breaks divert attention from public business. Now California has moved up radically its primary so that it will really be very early when the horse race is decided. Such changes are likely to further depress voter turnout that, in turn, is likely to accentuate the polarization of political parties. Again,

bad for will formation in relation to the problems that government might help us solve. Instead, the chattering class will argue over whether to pay our United Nation dues, whether to fund abortions for service personnel, ignoring the evidence of the failure of the war on drugs and denying the evidence for global warming.

Another aspect of our litany is campaign financing. Contributions from political action committees, corporations, unions and bundled contributions from congressional campaign committees are influential. Of course these funds fuel campaign adds that reside in hyperreality. It is a huge burden on politicians (unless independently wealthy) to raise sufficient funds to run expensive campaigns, especially in expensive media markets. One might hypothesize that the politicians become beholden to those who control the purse strings. Indeed, Lars-Erik Nelson recently reported (Nelson, 1999, p. 7) that moderate Republicans are kept in line by the threat of financing and running more conservative candidates in primaries where the right wing vote is often decisive. Moreover, many legislative initiatives are passed or blocked by back room negotiations. Tax breaks for tobacco companies is a recent example. Military contracts for things not requested by the Pentagon is another. Despite the promise by the revolutionary 104th Republican Congress, the appropriations process and the highway bill have as much pork as ever. It is an ironic aspect of postmodern politics to anyone paying attention that one sees both the play in front of the curtain and the back stage play behind the curtain. In front of the curtain are the dignified reasonable sounding policy pronouncements. Behind the curtain, as revealed by such cynics as the Sunday gas bag battalions there is analyses of the base motives of those in front of the curtain.

WHAT IS CROWDED OUT?

So, what does the sorry state of our politics leave us without, how are we wanting? We lack a steering mechanism, we lack leadership, we are drifting. To be sure, it doesn't always feel that bad. State and local governments seem solvent, although increments of surplus revenue often comes from gambling. Gambling itself is the perfect postmodern industry. Given worldwide industrial over capacity what could be more perfect than an industry where we have massive consumption without production. Real problems with local governments do not seem to be at crisis levels, but reporting is slim, hardly any investigative reporting seems to be happening. Crime is down even if the populace feels less safe. Of course, all of this could fall apart if the economy goes south,

and it is not as if Chairman Greenspan has revoked the business cycle. How long can the United States be immune from contamination from economic crises in Asia, Russia and South America? How long can American specialty steel plants survive when crisis countries are dumping their production onto our markets? A similar problem is popping up with many agricultural products. What would it take to trigger a deflationary panic? Would some force or institution come forth to provide leadership and steering capacity? If policy debate indicates that IMF policies are outdated and counter-productive will the steering function operate in such a way as to make adjustments? As of now, it looks like the inertia of received "wisdom" will prevail regardless of evidence of its dysfunctionality. No bold initiatives are likely to be proposed because there is no one to do them.

Admittedly, there are some in the orbit of postmodernism, who, however reluctantly, accept and put a different twist on the simulation of policy and politics. Baudrillard, in *America* (1988), argues that we live in an achieved utopia. To be sure, this utopia is a materialized one and is an aesthetic vulgarity; it is Disney theme parks, Las Vegas, spatial freedom, driving through the desert on a cloud of air drinking iced liquor. It is a utopia based on indifference to each other as well as the dazzlement of the spectacle. Moral indifference (not tolerance or acceptance, more proactive stances) is the basis of our freedoms and, the Christian right notwithstanding, is increasingly prevalent. Moreover, it is the only utopia possible in America. Freed from the ideologies of centralized state intervention (as in France) in culture and what we (not Baudrillard) call the life-world and bolstered by vast reaches of continental space—"you are now free to move about the country," we have the utopia, which we have sought. So, we guess, the message is "don't worry, be happy."

Now, Baudrillard could be right and in some moments in the flux and flow of the life-world we are ourselves caught up in the spectacle: we eat fine meals, are completely secure in our tenured jobs as full professors, visit wonderful places without personal expense where conferences are held and drive fine cars. We can be dyonesian and pretend to promethian spirit. We too partake of hyperreality and promethian spirituality that, we know we can be accused, is naught but a simulacrum of the "real" thing.

What is being neglected or crowded out by all Monica all the time? We recall here an admonition from Herbert Marcuse (1964) in the introduction to his iconic 60s new-left classic, *One-Dimensional Man*. He states that his presuppositions are three:

1. life is worth living;
2. it can be made better; and
3. all important intellectual effort ought be employed to make it better.

If one disagrees with these, do not bother to read further.

We suppose that every reader will have her favorite litany of neglected or distorted issues. As has been foreshadowed, top on our list is the criminal justice system. This is primarily because we know what we cannot (in public discourse) speak. Careful (even if positivistic) criminologists and jurists know that current policies based on slogans are irrational. "Three strikes and you're out," "determinant sentencing," ever more severe sentencing even for non-violent crimes. The prison-industrial complex Jesse Jackson calls it—more for prisons than for education. Why can't these things be discussed by a politician without fear of negative sound bites in the next election? So and so is soft on crime. It is worrisome; consider Nietzsche's (1989, p. 72) insight: "As the power and self-confidence of a community increase, the penal law always becomes more moderate; every weakening or imperiling of the former brings with a restoration of the harsher form of the latter." We hypothesize that criminal justice is beyond discourse and will formation because it is driven by self-referential epiphenomena in hyperreality which floats away from any life-world considerations. The hyperreal is more real and overcomes the lifeworld real. Because we are inundated by hyperreality we do not have the "self-confidence" to face the issue. Another way of putting it is that we are increasingly un "self-confident" of who "we" are in postmodernity. Thus, we are impelled to define a "they," so that we can be secure in our "we-ness." "We" do not do marijuana, "they" do. "They" are filmed on the show "Cops" and "we" are not. And, "we" will not do bad things for fear of becoming "they." Never mind, how did Monica get those big lips?

Among other taboo issues for which rational will formation could be helpful include tax reform, particularly at the state level. Oregon has an income tax and will not abide a sales tax. Washington state, Florida and Texas have sales tax and will not abide income taxes. Gridlock and fear of campaign sound bites bury discourse. Yet we know a lot about the issues. We know how to develop a concatenation of revenue sources that will insure stability across the business cycle. But it cannot be discussed. Science, however fallible at its roots is ignored in favor of hyperreality.

Other issues could, in a virtually endless list, be explored: health care, welfare for the bottom third that cannot be salvaged by current

reforms, campaign finance reform, education reform, competent discussion of the human activity that leads to global warming, and so on. On the latter issue, there is especially a culture of denial. Hardly anyone is listening to the careful studies, with the usual scientific reticence against bold statements that cannot be conclusively settled. Rush Limbaugh says "pooh, pooh." Don't worry be happy. Only the republic of science seems open to reasoned discourse and that republic has no chance against the conflated aggregations, self-referential epiphenomena, plastic disposable reifications, free play of signifiers, signified and signs, and all the other aspects of postmodern hyperreality.

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