



Constructing Political Reality: Language, Symbols, and Meaning in Politics

A Review Essay

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Murray Edelman. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. Pp. 137. \$7.95.

Joseph Freeman. *Government Is Good: Citizenship, Participation, and Power*. Columbia: University Press of Missouri, 1992. Pp. 138. \$12.95.

Barbara Hinckley. *The Symbolic Presidency*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Pp. 193. \$13.95.

Edward Tabor Linenthal. *Symbolic Defense: The Cultural Significance of the Strategic Defense Initiative*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989. Pp. 139. \$19.95.

W. Russell Neuman, Marion R. Just, and Ann N. Crigler. *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Pp. 172. \$10.95.

Thanks to the pioneering scholarship of Thurman Arnold (1935), Harold Lasswell (1951), Laswell, Lerner, and de Sola Pool (1952), Lasswell et al. (1965), and Murray Edelman (1964, 1971, 1977, 1988), few political scientists today would deny that politics possesses a symbolic dimension. Despite its acknowledged importance, however, this remains relatively understudied and underdeveloped within political science. The reasons for this include the failure of earlier research either to differentiate among symbolic theories or to clarify concepts, and the failure to develop theories and methods appropriate for doing symbolic political research. The latter has been a particular problem, as Ronald Brunner (1987) and Rebecca Klatch (1988) both observe. Brunner, in a study of the disassociation process of the key symbol "Watergate," notes that "while the conceptual and theoretical advances" of earlier symbolic research "have been preserved to some extent, they have remained largely underdeveloped for lack of systematic, empirical methods" (1987: 54). Klatch, after examining the strengths and weakness of the symbolic research tradition, concludes that a "multi-dimensional approach" is required that analyzes "political symbols within the particular social and historical context in which

they are embedded, empirical studies of political symbols in their surroundings” (1988: 154).

These problems notwithstanding, over the past few years there has been renewed scholarly interest in symbolic research and increased recognition that such research deepens and enriches our understanding of the political world. This essay will review a handful of books representative of this renewed interest. Taken as a whole they suggest that political scientists must pay closer attention to symbols, language, narrative form, rhetorical tropes, and interpretation if the ambiguities, paradoxes, and contradictions that embody politics are to be grasped and explicated. They further suggest that political decisions, actions, events, situations, and public policies all can be interpreted variously according to the perspective employed. The books discussed in this essay represent a significant addition to the literature exploring symbolic politics. Indeed, this essay will center on the extent to which they overcome the problems of theory and method found in earlier research. Before discussing these books, however, it is necessary first to examine the different views of the term symbol found in the symbolic politics literature, along with their underlying epistemologies and their relationship to political life.

SYMBOLS AND POLITICAL LIFE

The first view of symbols draws on a referential definition of the symbol: a symbol “stands for something other than itself” to which it corresponds (Edelman 1967: 6). That is, symbols assume meaning in relation to the objects, events, beliefs, values, or attitudes to which they refer. George Bush, for example, successfully used the American flag as a symbol in the 1988 presidential campaign, to stand for “pride in country,” “patriotism,” “Republican values,” and “respect” for American institutions and traditions. Symbols in this view, then, are stimuli that elicit responses: in the domain of politics, this means that symbols are used by political participants to provoke a desired response.

This view of symbols is rooted in the behavioral tradition within political science, which in turn is grounded in the philosophy of science called logical positivism or logical empiricism (Gunnell 1979). A fundamental assumption of positivism is that a realm of observable facts exists apart from the observer which can be studied objectively and scientifically. With regard to the development of knowledge, the aim of positivistic research is to develop general explanatory causal laws for social and political phenomena. The laws achieve generality insofar as they explain the observed behavior of a number of cases. Overall, positivists believe in the fundamental unity between the natural and social sciences and hold that the phenomena of the two sciences can be investigated similarly.

One possible reason why the symbolic dimension of politics has been understudied is the predisposition within behavioralism to frame politics in terms of who gets what and how. James March and Johan Olsen (1984) have labeled this predisposition instrumentalism. An instrumentalist understanding of politics defines political activity in terms of what means were used to achieve a desired end. Accordingly, instrumentalism is inclined to make decision making and the allocation of resources the central concerns of political life (1984: 734). Political action, then, is equated with concrete choice making, and choices are made by examining the consequences of each choice in relation to a given end (ibid., : 741).

If symbols are examined at all, they tend to be understood as “curtains that obscure the real politics,” or as “artifacts of an effort to make decisions” (ibid.). More specifically, in this view symbols are claimed to be used by political participants for the purpose of obscuring some aspect of reality in order to achieve a desired end, be it personal, partisan, or policy-oriented. The key point here is that symbols are thought to be separate from the “real” world of politics, and secondary to the “real” decision-making process.

For epistemological reasons, this view of symbols limits the kinds of symbolic inquiry one can conduct, and consequently has constrained the development of knowledge about symbolic politics. It does not look, for example, at how symbolic meanings are constructed, or whether political actions may be informed by symbolic meaning. Scholars working from this view have been content to identify symbols in politics and public policies, and have concentrated either on determining the number of times a symbol appears in a speech or document or describing a particular symbol in a given context. Further, this view of symbols, with its emphasis on how symbols are used, tends to define symbolic inquiry in terms of functional analysis. In fact, two important works with a functionalist orientation underscore this point by their titles: *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Edelman: 1964) and *The Political Uses of Symbols* (Elder and Cobb: 1983).

The second view of symbols present in the symbolic politics literature is the interpretive. From the interpretive perspective, political reality is constituted symbolically through language. That is, individuals can only know or understand reality through language, which itself is a symbol system. Thus, one's perception of reality is shaped by the language one possesses. We acquire language, or the symbolic meaning for the world around us, through social interaction with others. Although reality has a physical character, the meanings we have for reality are social constructions (Berger and Luckmann 1967). They arise in and through social interaction. These meanings collectively comprise a give interpretive order which is not fixed, but rather varies with individual and collective understanding.

This second view of symbols emerges from an interpretive philosophy of science, which assumes that the natural and social sciences are not similar. The reason the two sciences are not the same is because the natural sciences' subjects are things which move in response to stimuli, while the social sciences study humans who act with intention and purpose. Because humans act with intention and purpose a social science is required that does more than observe behavior and build explanatory laws. Instead, a social science should locate, interpret, and explain these purposes, and the meanings they hold for the individual (Fay 1975; Bernstein 1976; Gunnell 1981). In short, interpretive social science is concerned with investigating the meanings individuals hold about the empirical world or some aspect of it.

Accompanying the interpretive view of symbols is an understanding of politics that differs from the first view. Instead of defining politics in terms of decisions and their outcomes, the interpretive view defines politics as "discovering, elaborating, and expressing meanings and establishing shared (or opposed) conceptions of experience and values" (March and Olsen 1984: 741). Whereas the behavioral tradition concentrates on the behavior of political participants, the interpretive tradition concentrates on actions and the meanings attached to these actions by political actors. Politics, then, is as much a struggle over who gets to define political reality as it is a struggle over who gets what when and how. This struggle over meaning is important, because, in March and Olsen's words, what is at stake is "an interpretation of life" (1984).

Interpretive symbolic research typically centers on the ways in which language constructs political reality. More specifically, it asks questions about how political meanings are constructed, how political and policy situations are defined, and whose definitions of the situation prevail. Interpretive analysis further extends to the political, organizational, and institutional contexts in which individuals' interpretations of meaning occurs. In short, symbols are not incidental to political investigation, but are "the very phenomena of social [political] investigation" (Gunnell 1968: 185). Symbols are integral to the way in which we see and understand political life and the activities therein. Indeed, according to John Gunnell, "the social scientist must aim at illuminating the symbolic context that gives meaning to social action" (1968: 184). For many years, Murray Edelman has attempted to do just that.

EDELMAN AND THE SYMBOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Edelman's work on symbols and political language stands at the center of the symbolic perspective in political science. According to Charles Elder and Roger Cobb, "more than any other theorist, Edelman has succeeded in showing the pervasive and profound importance of symbols in politics" (1983: 1).

Because of his efforts political scientists generally are more sensitive to how symbols and language are used to define public problems, generate political support, and create favorable responses toward government actions. Over the course of four books, including his latest, he has offered a provocative review and critique of American politics and the mass media's representation of the political process. Collectively, his books span the two views of symbols discussed above. *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964) and *Politics as Symbolic Action* (1971) tend toward a behavioral approach to symbolic political analysis, while *Political Language: Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail* (1977) and *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1988) rely more on an interpretive approach.

Edelman has developed two significant themes in his work that together provide a foundation for *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. First, he maintains that democratic governments do not simply reflect citizens' wants and preferences, but instead help to shape those wants and preferences. Governments are able to do this through symbols, myths, ritual, and political language, all of which is used to create an "everyday world of politics." The "will of the people," then, is molded as much by government as government is molded by it.

His second theme is that symbolism and language function in politics to maintain established power, status, and resource differentials. Elites are able to soothe the public, blunt conflict, and divert attention from overt material inequalities through a variety of symbolic and linguistic devices. This theme is prominent throughout *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, wherein Edelman argues that political news is arranged as a series of dramatic events with "enemies," "leaders," and "problems" that both mask the nation's real problems and obscure unequal public policy outcomes.

Throughout his book, he reminds us that media news accounts are not simply factual presentations. Rather, such accounts represent an interpretation of the day's political facts, which themselves are interpretations of issues, events, situations, and problems as generated by interest groups, government officials, and elected representatives among others. Given the political economy of the mass media, it is hardly surprising that some interpretations are privileged over others; namely those that reinforce the political, social, and economic status quo.

Daily, then, the mass media constructs and reconstructs the world of public affairs. Political leaders are portrayed debating, voting, signing bills, and attending meetings, while also contending with crises, coping with defeats, and offering reassurances. It is a world that is both immediate and distant from the citizen viewer, whose everyday experiences are relegated to the realm of private life. Since citizens' interpretations of political and social

reality are seldom included in media news accounts (except as human interest), citizens conclude they are unimportant to the political spectacle. Media news accounts, in short, maintain citizen quiescence. How this is done is discussed in separate chapters on social problems, political leaders, political enemies, and political news.

Although *Constructing the Political Spectacle* is rich in insight, it does not entirely overcome the problems of theory and method noted at the beginning of this essay. Edelman is clear about the interpretive underpinnings of his analysis:

We are acutely aware that observers and what they observe construct one other; that political developments are ambiguous entities that mean what concerned observers construe them to mean; and that the roles and self-concepts of the observers themselves are also constructions, created at least in part by their interpreted observations.

This study is an essay applying that epistemological principle to politics. (Edelman 1988: 2)

Yet, he does not distinguish among the interpretive theories used in his analysis, nor does he systematically apply any one theoretical framework. He, instead, tends to draw on a diverse group of theorists, which creates the impression that theories of symbols and language can be mixed and matched according to one's argument. For example, Edelman introduces deconstruction in his book as though it were fully compatible with an interpretive view of symbols and language when in fact deconstruction challenges many of its assumptions.

Edelman is largely silent on the question of how one might actually conduct systematic symbolic research. He has preferred, instead, to argue by example; propositions are stated and followed by examples drawn from the social sciences or the real world of politics, which then support the initial proposition. The lack of explicit method neither diminishes nor detracts from his work. Simply, a scholar must look elsewhere for guidance on method. These problems notwithstanding, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* is an important contribution to the symbolic politics literature with its focus on how political reality is constructed through the complex interaction of language and symbols.

Next, we turn to some more recent symbolic politics scholarship. After first discussing each book's central themes and main arguments, we then examine the extent to which these books overcome the problems of theory and method remarked on earlier. Collectively, these books investigate a wide range of political subjects, including the presidency, the strategic defense initiative, political news, and local government.

RECENT SYMBOLIC RESEARCH

The Presidency

At one point in *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, Edelman observes (1988: 113) that an analysis of political leaders noted for their language skills would probably “reveal a small pattern of forms that appeal to large audiences.” Interestingly, Barbara Hinckley’s *Symbolic Presidency* provides just such an analysis. After examining the major and minor communications made in the first three years of each term by Presidents Truman through Reagan, Hinckley uncovers a pattern of forms so consistent she labels it the symbolic presidency. According to Hinckley (1990: 133), for the last 40 years presidents have offered a similar presentation of self to the American public: “They are alone in government, equivalent to the nation, religious and cultural leaders who shun politics and elections.”

Hinckley is able to identify the constituent elements of the symbolic presidency after systematically reviewing “all remarks delivered in person or televised live, both major and minor” as listed in *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (1990: 19). She analyzes these remarks through content and textual analysis, and by noting the speeches’ nature, timing, and audience. Separate chapters examine the institutional context of presidential speech making, the kinds of actors who appear in speeches, the kinds of actions described, and the kinds of audiences addressed. From this comprehensive analysis seven elements emerge that together create an institutionalized presidential self, or what Hinckley calls the symbolic presidency.

First, presidents portray themselves, along with the nation and the American people, as doing the work of government. Second, presidents identify themselves with the nation and its people to the extent that the three become indistinguishable. Third, presidents appear to work alone, receiving no help from staff, the Cabinet, administrators, or Congress. Fourth, presidents use interest groups as stand-ins for the American people as a whole. Fifth, presidents downplay political and electoral activities so as to appear to represent the nation. Sixth, presidents have assumed the role of religious and cultural leader. Seventh, presidents would like citizens to believe they are without peer; seldom do presidents refer to other presidents, or to the events and activities or previous administrations.

According to Hinckley, such a consistent presentation of the office is a post-World War II development that traces back to the delegation of presidential speech composition to a regular writing team. Charged with the task of producing quantities of speeches for use in diverse settings, presidential speech writers have come to rely on the past record for forms and phrases that sound presidential and conform with the public’s expectations of the

presidency. The institutionalization of speech writing within the executive office, then, has helped produce the pattern of forms comprising the symbolic presidency.

More generally, these forms are produced by the expectations of journalists and academics who also portray the president as one with the nation, one with government, a moral leader, unique and alone (1990: 135). In turn, these expectations shape the public's expectations which then shape how individual presidents act once in office. If people want something different from their presidents, then they must change their perceptions of the office of the presidency, for the "office is open to become what people say it is and expect it to be" (ibid.: 148).

Hinckley's book, as she herself notes, is important because it contributes to two literatures. As a systematic investigation of presidential symbolism it fills a gap in the symbolic politics literature, and as a study of institutional symbolism it fills a gap in the literature of the presidency. In contributing to these two literatures, Hinckley also contributes to our understanding of how symbolic research might be conducted. First, she is careful to discuss and define the terms symbol and symbolism before using them in her analysis. She notes, for example, that symbolic meanings are socially based, arising in and through social interaction. Further, the term symbolic "should not be opposed to real. Symbols have reality . . ." (ibid.: 5). In keeping with this interpretive view of symbols, her book's primary concern is with "how president's present themselves and the office to the American people" (ibid.: 16).

Besides discussing such key terms as symbolism and symbol, Hinckley carefully outlines her research methods. She describes her sources for presidential speeches and explains how they were analyzed by discussing what she looked for and why. Throughout the book, she supplies the word/reference tabulations and percentages that underpin her analysis, and she even provides appendices which further clarify her data sources and methods. In short, Hinckley's content and textual analyses enable her to establish concretely the presence of a symbolic presidency that cuts across individual presidents beginning with Truman.

Although her word/reference counts establish the forms of the symbolic presidency, it is not always clear that they support the conclusions she draws from them. It may be true that presidents seldom refer to electoral and political activities or address parties and economic interest groups, but this does not mean that presidents eschew the role of political leader. A president's politics can be conveyed in many different ways. For example, how a president describes a public problem and its solution can serve to symbolize his political values and beliefs, and in so doing subtly remind the public why he

was elected. Such presidential acts would not be captured by Hinckley's method.

Moreover, it may be true that presidents prefer the role of religious and cultural leader over that of party or policy leader, but it would be incorrect to assume that these roles are necessarily politically neutral. For example, Hinckley notes that "Reagan was no more likely to emphasize his role as religious leader, at least as measured quantitatively in these addresses, than the other presidents" (1990: 86). What we do not know, however, is whether his remarks varied in tone, content, value, and effect from those of other presidents. Even though Presidents Reagan and Carter may share an equal number of religious references, it is unlikely they perceived the religious leader role similarly or communicated the same religious values to the public except in the most general sense. In sum, Hinckley's method enables her to establish clearly the shape of the symbolic presidency, but it leaves open the question of how presidents use the resources of the symbolic presidency to appeal to the public.

The Strategic Defense Initiative

Few symbolic scholars have made political institutions their focus of study as Hinckley so ably does in *The Symbolic Presidency*. It is more common for scholars to study a public policy's symbolic dimension as Linenthal thoughtfully does in *Symbolic Defense* (1989). He first attempts to explain how a complex missile defense proposal caught the imagination of policymakers, and then shows how it became the center of an intense debate over contrasting visions of the nuclear age.

Advocates of SDI claimed that it would remove the perpetual threat of nuclear war, thereby ushering in a new era of peace. Opponents maintained that SDI created an illusion of security that in no way diminished the present nuclear threat. Because SDI was only a proposal, both advocates and opponents sought to persuade the public through symbolic and cultural appeals. To understand the nature of these appeals, Linenthal examines the public discourse surrounding SDI, specifically concentrating on the discourse of American editorial cartoons.

Linenthal finds that proponents linked SDI to a number of rhetorically compelling cultural traditions. For example, advocates portrayed SDI as a symbol of conquest that would enable Americans to explore and appropriate the space frontier just as they had done with the West. Advocates also represented SDI as the next technological breakthrough in a long line of historic triumphs (e.g., building the atomic bomb and the moon landing). As such, it would restore the country's sense of optimism and superiority. Finally, advocates linked SDI to symbols of transformation with the argument that

the world would be fundamentally changed as a result of SDI. One such change advocates anticipated was that world relations currently based on mutual deterrence would give way to relations based on permanent peace.

Opponents assumed the role of debunkers whose intent was to demystify inflated SDI rhetoric (Linenthal 1989: 72). They relied on symbols of negation designed to subvert support for the space-based weapons system. For example, opponents argued that the nation lacked the technological knowledge and resources to build SDI, which made the whole idea a farce or science fiction. Opponents also claimed that SDI was no means to peace. It would instead militarize space, start a costly space arms race, and destabilize arms control with the Soviet Union. In these and other ways opponents tried to negate claims made by SDI advocates.

Linenthal concludes that SDI was culturally significant because it promised to deliver the nation from its longstanding terror of nuclear weapons. Above all, it offered a vision of the world made safe because of American technology. Moreover, as a symbol of deliverance, SDI gave conservatives the opportunity to offer the nation an affirmative vision of the future and a new "sacred cause."

Symbolic Defense establishes that symbols, images, and the ability to link facts to rhetorically compelling cultural traditions were important elements of the SDI policy debate. For scholars interested in doing this kind of analysis themselves, however, Linenthal's book provides little in the way of a model. In contrast to Hinckley's work, Linenthal's symbolic analysis begins without any introductory discussion of symbolic research, its theories, or its concepts. Although *Symbolic Defense* is concerned with the "struggle to define the cultural significance of SDI," he never defines the term culture or indicates which theory of culture underlies his analysis (1989: xiii). A single quotation from Mircea Eliade, in which he states that some "cultural fashions" (i.e., SDI) are significant because of what they reveal about a people's "dissatisfactions, drives, and nostalgias," stands as the book's theoretical base (ibid.).

Linenthal's book also falls short on the question of method. He states that he interviewed "a number of people who helped me make sense of the cultural world of SDI," without explaining why these people were selected or how he went about interviewing them (ibid.). Furthermore, he never clarifies whether the interviews were formal or informal, and never specifies what questions were asked, or what interview procedures were followed. In addition, Linenthal never explains how he analyzed the public discourse of SDI, and does not inform the reader how he gathered the editorial cartoons, what guided his selections, or how they were coded for meaning. These are some serious drawbacks in an otherwise insightful cultural analysis.

Political News and Learning

Common Knowledge, by W. Russell Neuman, Marion Just, and Ann Crigler, thoughtfully and intelligently examines how citizens come to understand and learn about world events and relatedly how the media choose to report on and characterize important public issues (1992: xiv–xv). Most people, as their depth interviews reveal, lack the time and interest to devote to public affairs and “are puzzled by why they should follow issues over which they have no control” (ibid.: xiv). Yet, people do have views about public affairs, they actively interpret the world around them, and they assign meaning to issues, events, and actions. What people know about public affairs and how (e.g., common knowledge) are the book’s primary concerns. More specifically, the authors are “concerned with the dynamic interaction among individuals (with personal interests, beliefs, and experiences), the issues with their varying degrees of complexity, and the media with their different journalistic traditions” (ibid.: 6–7). Ultimately, their aim is to develop a constructionist model of political communication “in which the audience is seen as constructing meaning from a rich media environment” (ibid.: 7).

Five issues (the 1987 stock market crash, SDI, South Africa, AIDS, and drug abuse) are examined by the authors across three news media (newspapers, news magazines, and television news). They then analyze how these issues are framed by both the viewing audience and the media. Frames, according to the authors, “are conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information” (ibid.: 61). Surprisingly, they found that individuals and the media “use a few central frames for interpreting all five issues” (ibid.: 62). Issues were framed in terms of the economy, conflict, powerlessness, human impact, or morality.

Although the audience and the media share common interpretive frames, they do use them differently. The media’s use of frames is constrained by professional norms (e.g., objectivity) and economic concerns (e.g., audience share); while individuals “frame issues in a more visceral and moralistic . . . style” rooted in their life experiences as well as encounters with popular culture (ibid.: 76–77). Individuals, for example, rely more frequently on the human impact and morality frames as means for understanding the five issues, whereas the media use them less frequently and with qualifications. More importantly, though, the authors found that individuals do not passively accept the ways in which the media frame issues. Rather, “audience members alternatively accept, ignore, and reinterpret the dominant frames offered by the media” (ibid.: 62). Moreover, they “actively filter, sort, and reorganize information in personally meaningful ways in the process of constructing an understanding of public issues” (ibid.: 77).

Besides examining how issues are framed, the authors investigate the extent to which people learn from news. For those interested in mass communication and political learning research, these chapters are invaluable. The authors do a fine job summarizing the existing literature and explaining how their own findings either confirm, disconfirm, or elaborate on existing research. Particularly welcome is the authors' fair-minded treatment of television news as a learning medium. Specifically, they found that television news, with its ability to grab people's attention, "was most successful in communicating information about topics that were of low salience" with audience members (ibid.: 113).

Common Knowledge significantly advances the symbolic politics literature by developing a clear and detailed constructionist model of political communication. Building on William Gamson's earlier model, Neuman, Just, and Crigler outline the "general principles of theory and methodology" underlying the constructionist approach. Key to this model are its emphases on an "active, interpreting, meaning-constructing audience," its focus on "common knowledge," and the three-way interactions that occur between individual, medium, and issue (ibid.: 17–18). Individuals, according to this perspective, are actively engaged in the construction of political reality, as they "select items for attention, reject or ignore topics, redefine terms, infer meaning, draw parallels, and make connections" (ibid.: 119). Not only is the audience involved in the construction of political reality, but so are all the "key players in the process," including government spokesmen, public affairs people, campaign managers, candidates, officials, and journalists.

Besides making a theoretical contribution to the symbolic politics literature, *Common Knowledge* also makes a significant methodological contribution by using multiple methodologies to explore the process of meaning construction. Because the authors use conventional empirical social scientific methods and qualitative methods, they are able to build both breadth and depth into their study. More specifically, they use content analysis to explore how the media covered the four issues under study, followed by depth interviews, surveys, and laboratory experiments to determine how individuals interpret and learn from the news. The depth interviews were the "primary tool" for assessing how individuals actually construct meanings for the world around them.

A clear strength of *Common Knowledge* is its attention to issues such as method selection, data selection, research validity, and how the individual methods fit together collectively to achieve the study's goals. These matters, along with others, are discussed fully in chapter two as well as in an appendix on method. If there is one drawback to this otherwise fine study, it is that the authors could have supplied more anecdotes, details, and examples from the depth interviews, especially when discussing how issues were framed.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Government Is Good, by Joseph Freeman, also takes up the question of how political meaning is constructed, but it does so from an unusual perspective. *Government Is Good* is a first-person account of the “lived world of face-to-face politics and governance” and as such offers the reader a “consciously personal perspective on public matters” (1992: 4). The book, however, is not a political memoir nor is it an insider’s account of government. Instead, Freeman, a political scientist, adopts a phenomenological stance toward his experience as council member in a small, southern manufacturing town (Hill City) so that he might probe “the inner sense of what doing the activity is like” (ibid.: 4). More specifically, he examines the steady stream of actions, decisions, thoughts, conversations, and meetings from which he and citizens alike form their interpretations of government.

Running throughout *Government Is Good* is Freeman’s belief that government “doesn’t just happen” as a “result” of “factors.” Instead, he argues, “It takes place. It is always located in a concrete here and now” (ibid.: 129). Furthermore, “it is something done by people” usually well but sometimes badly. Regardless, it is in and through the actions of elected officials that government as an abstract entity comes to have meaning for both participants and citizens. These actions, in turn, possess multiple meanings—practical, professional, personal, historical, symbolic—depending on the context and situation. Ultimately, official actions emerge from and simultaneously shape the common life of the community.

Freeman organizes the chapters of *Government Is Good* around the different kinds of activities that have come to form his experience as an elected official. These include praxis, symbol, memory, context, auctoritas, meetings, and civis. In the chapter on symbols, for example, Freeman explores the way death is treated symbolically by government through official funerals, war memorials, and bronze plaques. He further explores how Hill City creates “official” government meanings through the city seal, commemorations, and even the city building itself with its deep carpets and wall of draperies. In the civis chapter, Freeman observes how the very persons of council and mayor come to symbolize government to local residents: how we look, how we act, what we say, how we express ourselves and how we understand ourselves are all reference points that people use as they watch and listen (1992: 114). Indeed, it is this symbolic role of governing that is most surprising to him when he is first elected to office. According to Freeman, “the existence of this new role is one of the great revelations of the actual experience of elected office” (ibid.: 116).

Freeman consciously avoids using a specific method in *Government Is Good*. To the extent any method is followed it is his attempt to “bracket” his

own perceptions, feelings, and experiences in and about government. The closest Freeman comes to discussing directly his views on theory and method is in the personal bibliography, which is attached at the book's end. There he indicates which books and scholars (e.g., interpretive, hermeneutical, and phenomenological) helped shape his belief that "the direct experience of political activity is an irreducible part of empirical political study." In addition, he notes that Edmund Husserl's dictum, "back to the things themselves," guided his own efforts "as he struggled for a way to express for a critical audience the empirical data of the direct experience of holding elected office" (ibid.: 135).

Government Is Good is unusual in that the author is not a ghostly presence in the social science text, who appears only in the third person. On the contrary, Freeman makes himself a visible, speaking subject whose presence in the text is unavoidable. His book is personal, deeply felt, and, perhaps most important, illustrates quite clearly the process of meaning construction in government. That is, it occurs through the interactions of real people in real situations as they carry out the activities of government.

CONCLUSION

From this survey it is plain that symbolic political research has been flourishing in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Scholars have tackled a wide range of subjects imaginatively and in ways that deepen our understanding of the political world. Further, it is clear that the construction of political meaning is neither occasional nor reserved for extraordinary events like political campaigns. Rather, the construction of political meaning is ongoing and embedded in the very dailiness of politics.

Collectively, these books represent a stride forward in how scholars might study symbolic politics. Both Hinckley and Neuman et al. attempt to develop systematic, empirical methods as called for by Brunner (1987), while Linenthal grounds his SDI analysis in particular social and historical contexts as suggested by Klatch. Freeman represents still another way one might study meaning construction empirically. From these books no single method emerges as the sole way to study symbolic politics, but there seems to be an emerging consensus among them that the interpretive view of symbols should be the guiding theoretical framework.

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