

This article was downloaded by: [T&F Internal Users], [Kevin Swanson]

On: 13 October 2011, At: 04:38

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Political Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/upcp20>

The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship, by Jeffrey Edward Green

Hélène Landemore ^a

^a Department of Political Science, Yale University

Available online: 04 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Hélène Landemore (2011): The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship, by Jeffrey Edward Green, *Political Communication*, 28:3, 402-406

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2011.588871>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

is a need to convince readers that the works selected are representative of all, or at least most, of what was being shown at the time. The authors go into great detail in analyzing each of these productions, but it would be helpful to get a better sense of their relative popularity and whether there were other works of art that presented alternative stories and lessons. Suspicions of cherry picking will inevitably arise in these types of studies. One way to increase the credibility of such studies is to provide readers with exceptions to the rule: media content that did not conform to the general pattern being described.

This criticism aside, I recommend this book to all those who have an interest in media and conflict. The case of the Northern Ireland peace process is an important one, and this study provides valuable evidence and insights that offer plenty of food for thought.

References

- Keeble, R., Tulloch, J., & Zollman, F. (2010). *Peace journalism, war, and conflict resolution*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Wolfsfeld, G. (2004). *Media and the path to peace*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship, by Jeffrey Edward Green. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010. 296 pp. \$49.95 hardback.

Reviewed by HÉLÈNE LANDEMORE

Jeffrey Green's *The Eyes of the People* is a singularly brave attempt at defending as normatively appealing the ideal of plebiscitary democracy held in suspicion by most democratic theorists. The thesis of the book is that instead of chasing the anachronistic ideal of Athens on a mass scale—a model haunting most contemporary democratic theory—we should adjust our ideal to the reality of contemporary citizenship. This reality is that of passivity rather than participation, silent observation (and listening) rather than voice, hierarchy rather than equality, and, more generally, being ruled rather than ruling. Citizens in the age of mass democracy are not united, Green argues against what he characterizes as the “vocal” model of democracy, by a collective experience in self-rule. They are united by a common experience of spectatorship, that is, their being part of a multitude of individuals whose only common point and source of power is that of their “gaze” upon the leaders who make decisions on their behalf. This new normative ideal is captured by the term “plebiscitary democracy”—a fraught locution and paradigm that Green aims to rehabilitate. It is also well illustrated by the cover of the book, which displays anonymous crowds of spectators at Obama's inauguration watching his image on large TV screens. The individuals in the picture are facing away from the viewer and are united only by one characteristic, that of a common visual focus on the looming figure of the president (in ways that are, incidentally and perhaps not completely fortunately, reminiscent of Hobbes's *Leviathan*'s frontispiece).

Hélène Landemore is Assistant Professor of Political Sciences at Yale University.

Address correspondence to Hélène Landemore, Yale University, Department of Political Science, P.O. Box 208301, Rosenkranz Hall, 115 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06520-8301, USA. E-mail: helene.landemore@yale.edu

Spectatorship is thus a central concept of Green's new theory of citizenship, together with the "gaze" as the new locus of popular sovereignty. The "gaze" is, specifically, a Foucauldian concept (also inspired by feminist theory) by which citizens reduced to the condition of being ruled on a daily basis regain some power over their rulers through visual control of their public appearances. These concepts allow Green to redefine the People as an "ocular" entity rather than a vocal one, that is, an entity characterized by a power to see rather than a power to say. Specifically, the move from a vocal to an ocular model of popular power entails three shifts. First, the object of popular power is no longer the law but the leaders who are watched. Second, the organ of popular power is the gaze, not the decision (the moment of voting or of passing a law). Third, the critical ideal of autonomy (the People's ability to live under laws it has helped to author) is replaced by the critical ideal of "candor." Candor is meant to capture not so much a virtue to be directly expected from the leaders' character but an institutional property guaranteeing that leaders are not in control of the conditions of their publicity. When leaders are placed in conditions of publicity that they do not fully control, they are more likely to reveal the truth of their personae and intentions. Candor can thus serve as the standard by which citizens can discriminate between better and worse—empowered and less empowered—experiences of viewership.

In order to build this ocular paradigm of popular power, Green draws on a forgotten as well as, according to him, overly maligned tradition of political theory, that of plebiscitary democracy, of which he finds the main sources in Weber and, to a lesser degree, in his successors Schumpeter and Schmidt, as well as Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Benjamin Constant. Green shows the promise of the reinvention of popular power to be found in Weber, explains why it historically failed to take hold in 20th-century political science, and argues that this failure should not prevent us from recovering and fleshing out the valuable core of plebiscitary democracy for the purposes of contemporary democratic politics.

The book is remarkable in its critical dimension. Green points out a discrepancy that will now strike many as obvious but was not as clearly diagnosed until this book between the ideal of democracy as self-rule and its reality, for most citizens most of the time, as the experience of *being ruled* and nothing more. In that sense, the book points to a vast delusion at the heart of all existing theories of democracy, including not just deliberative democrats like Rawls or Habermas and participatory democrats like Barber or Pateman, but also aggregative democrats like Schumpeter or pluralist democrats like Robert Dahl. Even the last group, Green convincingly argues, ultimately presupposes an ideal of democracy in which the "voice"—that is, some kind of expressive action like, *a minima*, the casting of a ballot—remains the central act of citizenship and the locus of popular sovereignty. As Green puts it, however, "the vocal model conceals the exclusion from government that is fundamental to the phenomenology of everyday political life" (pp. 29–30). Many democratic theorists should thus feel the sting—and the justice—of Green's critique of a model of democracy centered exclusively and unrealistically around citizens' "voice." The truth is, even exciting experiments in deliberative democracy—deliberative polls, citizens' assemblies, or citizens' juries, which involve randomly selected participants and give them the opportunity to exercise an actual voice, not just a vote—involve at best a few hundred participants at a time. Furthermore, the chances of being selected are, for any given citizen, rather slim.

On the constructive side, the book proposes a bold new theory that aims to break from the kind of utopianism, or as Green sometimes even less charitably suggests, anachronism of many deliberative and participatory theories. It also breaks, more surprisingly, from the arguably more realist theory of citizenship and power at the heart of Schumpeterian democracy. Green shares with the latter a focus on elites and leaders. But he rejects Schumpeter's

debunking of the ideal of the People as incoherent as well as his view that the main control of citizens comes from their periodic ability to “vote the rascals out.” Rather than simply accommodate the fact of citizens’ apathy and relative powerlessness while keeping the locus of citizens’ control in the vote, Green proposes to reconceptualize the very passivity of the citizen-spectator or the citizen-being-ruled as, at least when experienced under conditions of public candor, an alternative form of “power.” In effect, this passive form of empowerment, through the eyes rather than the voice, is what constitutes “the People” as a meaningful collective.

On the face of it, this plebiscitary model offers a plausible theory of popular sovereignty for an age halfway between that of the “phantom public” of the early 20th century and the future aimed at by deliberative and participatory democrats. When Walter Lippmann (1925) wrote his famous denunciation of the public, the People was a ghost not just because it lacked a voice but also because, to borrow Green’s imagery, it was partially blind, given the limited control over leaders offered by the then-nascent mass information technologies like the radio or the TV. Today’s technologies, by contrast, afford much more control on the candor of leaders than even 50 years ago. Consider the omnipresence of cell phone cameras, which, combined with the existence of YouTube as a universal video platform, allows the instant diffusion, to the entire citizenry, of leaders’ slip-ups or strange behaviors. Candor is indeed a virtue forced onto modern politicians, to the extent that it ensures a more transparent access of the masses to the real “being” and intentions of their leaders. *The Eyes of the People* accounts for this change in the nature of both leadership and citizenship without falling back, awkwardly and inaccurately, on the old category of empowerment through participation or the paradigm of the voice. One cannot but agree that Green’s carefully constructed ideal of “candor” as a political virtue of our age is empirically plausible and normatively desirable.

Where the book loses persuasiveness, however, is when it claims that the ocular model can by itself offer an alternative to the vocal one. As a replacement for the vocal model, the optical model is inadequate for an essential reason, which is that the gaze, no matter how empowered, is still dependent on the voice. This concession is made early in the book when Green admits that “the gaze is best understood as the reflection of a power that has its base in some nonocular terrain . . . (such as elections)” (p. 11). In other words, the gaze has power only to the extent that it is accompanied by some form of actual physical or vocal control—the existence of periodic elections, the rule of law, the coercion of the state, and so forth. Despite this initial concession, though, the rest of the book sometimes proceeds as if it did not matter and the gaze was sufficient to found a new conception of popular sovereignty. This, of course, is implausible. Consider Tunisia and Egypt—countries where there were none of the institutions of a real, functioning “vocal” democracy. No amount of gaze was sufficient, there, to tame the leaders, although it is true that more transparency did precipitate their demise (see the debates surrounding the role of Facebook and Google Earth in spreading knowledge and political awareness among citizens in the few years before the revolutions). In the end, however, it took the actual physical gathering of people in public squares, the growling and furious sounds of the crowd, their voice and not just their gaze, to push tyrants away and regain some control.

Another way in which the book might fall short of its ambitions is that while one of its great accomplishments is to supply an ethical perspective accounting for the actual experience of citizens in contemporary democracies as mostly spectators rather than actors of politics, the reader may remain unsure that this ethical perspective is really the one we should content ourselves with. After all, in the same way that modern technologies now make it possible for citizens to enforce the norm of candor on their leaders, they also make

it possible for more classical forms of vocal empowerment to be reconquered. Even if deliberative democracy on a mass scale remains (at least for now) hard to conceptualize and even if we are still far from anything as radical as the proponents of e-democracy hope, there are initiatives like the OpenGov Web site launched by the Obama administration and the experiments in Wiki government conducted by Beth Noveck¹ that indicate new avenues for vocal power through self-selected participation in collective decision making. On the local level, new technologies provide willing citizens with small but meaningful sources of empowerment. For example, Web sites like seeclickfix.com allow anyone to register a problem observed in a given neighborhood—whether a broken lamp post, an overflowing trash bin, or drug dealing on a street corner—and notify relevant authorities or even make suggestions as to how to fix it. One could argue that given the rise of the Internet, the notion of spectatorship does not do justice to the avenues opened by new technology.

In fact, one could argue that the important distinction between participation and political involvement recovered by Jeffrey Green can be used to support a more active model of citizenship. Whereas political participation refers to active political engagement (voting, giving money to candidates, campaigning, writing petitions, running for office, serving in government), political involvement simply refers to an awareness of political issues and problems and a general interest in them. Green points out that low participation is compatible with a high level of political involvement, a subtle point that Green's ocular model can make much more of than existing political theory. Political involvement in the age of the Internet, however, can be tapped in ways it could not be in the age of the TV and the radio—an age Green's book often seems to privilege, as the already mentioned prominent TV screens on its cover suggest—and turned into something like action, if not quite participation in the old sense. Some political scientists have suggested that the success of Wikipedia is due in part to the fact that energies that used to be passively consumed in front of the TV have now found an outlet on the Internet. Similarly, more classical political activities—sit-ins, demonstrations, organizations of collectives, and so forth—benefit from the availability of civic energies liberated by new technologies, as the examples mentioned above testify to as well as, more dramatically, the recent events of the Arab Spring. Thus, while Green may be right that it is neither realistic nor desirable to entertain outdated notions of participation, one may object to what sometimes looks like an attempt at dignifying apathy and passivity that also misses the potential for new forms of vocal power introduced by recent technological changes.

The strength of Green's book, in the end, is to point out the ways in which contemporary normative theory needs to enrich its vocabulary and conception of popular sovereignty. The gaze is, in this perspective, a useful supplement to the paradigm of the voice. Similarly, the shift of focus proposed by Green from the legislature to the leaders is to be taken less as the right and final answer to the ever contested question of the locus of popular sovereignty and more as an attempt to complicate, re-problematize, and ultimately refine the terms of the debate.

Note

1. Beth Noveck documents the involvement of self-selected citizens in helping government experts go through patent files and speed the process along in remarkably efficient ways. These citizens did not act as members of parties or political groups or organized collectives. They just logged in as individuals working from home, but they contributed in that humble way to a public good (Noveck, 2009).

References

- Lippmann, W. (1925). *The phantom public*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Noveck, B. (2009). *Wiki government: How technology can make government better, democracy stronger, and citizens more powerful*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

When Politicians Attack! Party Cohesion in the Media, by Tim Groeling. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 242 pp. \$28.99 paper.

Reviewed by C. DANIELLE VINSON

Partisanship is inescapable in news coverage of American politics today, whether it is party leaders in Congress holding dueling press conferences or the president chiding members of the opposing party for not working with the White House to solve pressing problems. With his book *When Politicians Attack! Party Cohesion in the Media*, Tim Groeling goes a long way toward providing a roadmap to understand partisan talk and parties' efforts to create a brand name for themselves, and he identifies a somewhat surprising challenge for party unity—being the president's party, especially in unified government.

Employing the useful analogy of the party as franchise, Groeling clearly explains the challenge for parties: get the individuals who are elected under the party name (the franchisees) to communicate in ways that will help the collective party (franchise). Of course, the problem as Groeling notes is that parties do not often have the kind of strong controls that a franchise has to enforce the party line, and individual politicians often have good reasons for defecting from the party's preferred messages (attacking the other party or praising one's own party). Given the variety of partisan messages that can be communicated, Groeling creates a theoretical framework to describe, explain, and predict what messages are covered by the media and their impact on the public.

The data for Groeling's research come primarily from two content analyses of network television news. One is a data set he compiled with Matthew Baum on network coverage following rally events involving U.S. military action that codes congressional evaluations of the president. The other is a data set from the Center for Media and Public Affairs that "codes every evaluation of or by a partisan figure" on network evening news during six selected years from 1981 to 2001.

Beginning with what messages are covered, Groeling's theory relies both on what messages partisans are most likely to communicate (praise for their own party or criticism of the other) and on what the media find most newsworthy—authoritative sources, balance (the need for both parties or two sides of an issue), conflict (criticism), and novelty (intra-party criticism or interparty praise). In presidential coverage, Groeling finds that criticism of the president is most prevalent, even within his own party and despite substantial support for the president from his party in legislative votes. The author demonstrates that while criticism of the president by his own party increases when his approval ratings decline, praise by his party does not increase when approval increases, suggesting that the media prefer to cover the intraparty criticism even when intraparty praise is available. There are other potential explanations for the abundance of presidential criticism by the president's party,

C. Danielle Vinson is Professor of Political Science at Furman University.

Address correspondence to C. Danielle Vinson, Department of Political Science, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Hwy., Greenville, SC 29613, USA. E-mail: danielle.vinson@furman.edu