

## **STEAL THIS MESSAGE, PART I.**

**By William Matthew McCarter**

In the recent USA Gallup Polls, a survey of "likely voters" indicates that if the Presidential Elections were held today, then George W. Bush would receive 48 percent of the vote and John Kerry would receive 47 percent. When "registered voters" were asked the same question, then 50 percent supported John Kerry and 44 percent supported George W. Bush. When "National Adults" were surveyed, then 51 percent supported John Kerry and 43 percent supported George W. Bush. These results varied even more when pollsters threw Ralph Nader's candidacy into the mix. One of the most striking things about these polls is that, given that the race is so close, the winner of the election will probably be determined depending upon who shows up on Election Day. If "likely voters" show up, then George W. Bush will win the election, if "registered voters" or "national adults" make it to the polls, then it will be John Kerry. One of the things that stands out in looking at these polls is that the "leader of the free world," The President of the United States will most likely be chosen by a small number of people. In my own community in Southeast Missouri, a community that once was what I would consider to be a fortress of civic responsibility, only 20.4 percent of registered voters showed up to the polls during the last election. If those statistics hold true for the Presidential Election in November, then nearly four out of every five Americans will not participate in the political process. This fact begs the question, "Why are so many Americans unconcerned about who leads their country?"

There are two responses common among those who are asked that question: One is tainted with apathy about the political system at large, while the other has to do with the message that the candidates get out to the people. One of my former students said, "It doesn't matter who you vote for - Look at the last election. Al Gore won the popular vote but still didn't win the election." This kind of apathy or complacency among voters is common, but not endemic. Nothing can really be done about those who choose to not take part in the political process because they think the system itself is flawed or corrupt. However, the vast majority of those who do not take part in the political process still believe in the process in theory, just not in practice and it is within this group of people that the "Working Class Left" can begin to find its constituency. Before moving on into the "message" of this "working class left," this paper must

first focus on the messenger and how the message gets disseminated. The first part of this article will focus on this messenger and the subsequent sections will deal with the message itself.

The medium in which political discourse is disseminated to the masses takes on many forms, but each of these forms can be traced back to some type of media. Everyone gets their political information through cable television, network television, the internet or some form of print media. One of the most profound ways that the media has influenced the political consciousness of its "viewership" is through the soundbyte. Difficult and complex things (abstractions) are being broken down into the "least common denominator" and disseminated through the various forms of media. It is through these soundbytes that popular culture gets terms like "voodoo economics" and what came to be the benchmark of whether a Presidential candidate deserved to be reelected - "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" Wendy Kaminer explains this in her book, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional* when she writes that the "popularity of books comprising slogans, sound bites, and recipes for success is part of a larger, frequently bemoaned trend blamed on television and the failures of public education...Intellectuals, right and left, complain about the debasement of public discourse the way fundamentalist preachers complain about sex." Leftist intellectuals must retreat from what they consider to be the "debasement of public discourse" and learn to embrace it, and most importantly, use it. What the Left in the 1960's called: "Hell No We Won't Go," the Left of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century calls: "it is unethical for the poor in America to go off to a foreign country and fight a war that has been ideologically positioned as being a 'good war' by the hegemony of the news media because they are owned by the Capitalist Class who will, invariably, make millions of dollars off of the bloodshed of those who have little or nothing." The problem with the latter is that you can't get the masses attention with a dissertation about how war reinforces and enriches the capitalist class - you must have something that can fit on a bumper sticker. The Average American views statements like the latter as intellectual posturing and won't respond to it, however, if you tell them "Girls say 'Yes' to Boys who say 'No'," you not only get their attention, but keep it. Because of this phenomenon in American Culture, the "message" section of this article will strive to break the message down into a soundbyte - a bumper sticker.

Chomsky writes in *Domestic Constituencies* that "there is a 'public arena' in which, in principle, individuals can participate in decisions that involve society" and goes on to add that "Democracy functions insofar as individuals can operate meaningfully in the public arena,

meanwhile running their own affairs." Because of the limited time that Americans can devote into the political sphere of their lives, they deserve to have a "bumper sticker" primer for the political debates that they are expected to be a part of. However, in contemporary media, the Right are the only ones providing that kind of message and consequently, more and more Americans are being coerced into the ranks of the Right. Chomsky also writes in *The Decline of the Democratic Ideal* that "one fundamental goal of any well-conceived indoctrination program is to direct attention elsewhere, away from effective power, its roots, and the disguises it assumes." He adds that "the corporatization of America during the past century was an attack on democracy." Douglas Kellner appears to concur with Chomsky when he writes "radio, television, film and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities." Kellner adds that his "study of television in the United States... disclosed the takeover of the television networks by major transnational corporations and communications conglomerates [which] was a part of a "right turn" within U.S. society... whereby powerful corporate groups won control of the state and the mainstream media."

The media conglomerates have influenced American society so much that often the message of the people is, in effect, the "message to the people." Politicians and the political pundits that have sprung up in recent years are becoming more and more concerned with how that message "reaches the people." This illustrates how the media influences the mass. Instead of politicians going to the people and finding out what they *want*, they treat political campaigns like advertising campaigns and try to force the masses to want the candidates like they want Post Toasties or Cheerios. In *Screens of Power*, Timothy Luke talks about this "commodification" asserting that the "new technical and economic forces are creating a more culturally impoverished and intellectually destructive world system, which now is based upon attaining the complete commodification of all aspects of human life." Although Luke's book deals with the larger consequences of media culture - the "Screens of Power," this paper will only look at the political consequences of this phenomenon.

According to Luke, "Television does not 'bring the entire world into our homes' as much as it moves everybody who is watching to the same place and into the same events." The media strives to channel political discourse into a binary- Democrat and Republican and as Howard Zinn writes in *A People's History of the United States*: "[c]oming to the end of the century, observing its last twenty-five years, we have seen... a capitalist encouragement of enormous

fortunes alongside desperate poverty, a nationalistic acceptance of war and preparations for war. Governmental power swung from Republicans to Democrats and back again, but neither party showed itself capable of going beyond that vision." Because of the media's influence in bringing "everybody who is watching to the same place," the binaries of American politics are reinforced and even the two parties who have been historically different in philosophy have moved closer to the center in their political discourse. In *One Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse writes "liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination. The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual... Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves." Because of the role of corporate media in disseminating the political discourse of American society, Americans are conditioned to wait for their respective candidates to articulate their message, rather than being active agents in formulating the message. Democracy has been interpolated in the sense that where the average voter once was the source in which political messages began, suddenly becomes the audience in which the message will be received - constituents who once were those whose voices were articulated, suddenly became consumers who needed to be persuaded to *buy* the products that were conceived and delivered by the major media conglomerates.

If one were to look at how the major media controls the means for the dissemination of political discourse, then one should wonder why the Left should even bother to talk about their political agenda. After all, it might never be disseminated. This begs the question, "Why shouldn't we join the ranks of those who are ambivalent to the political discourse? The ones that were earlier described as being "tainted with apathy about the system at large." Why shouldn't the Left just joyfully join the ranks of Giorgio Agamben's "Whatever Beings" and hasten the "coming community" where the struggle is no longer a struggle for the conquest of the State, but a struggle between the state and the non-state. Essentially, that is precisely what those who are ambivalent to politics have already done - become "whatever beings." Rather than digress into a treatise on whether or not the current system is even worth saving, this paper will focus on what Bruno Latour calls *matters of concern* and will try to provide the working class Left with a way to engage the system.

Although the capitalist system often proves to be one that is undesirable for the working class Left - one that allows the poor to be exploited and commodified as simply "labor," its saving

grace (if there is such a thing) is that it has no conscience. The only ideology that capitalism supports is one of profit. If the public wants to watch dancing poodles on prime time television, then the capitalist system will give it to them. There is a delicate balance between what the media wants the public to see and what their consumers want them to show. It is within this balance - what their consumers want them to show - that the Working Class Left can once again (at least partially) reclaim their right to be a part of political discourse and not just the audience that will ultimately receive it. Consumerism provides Americans with a unique opportunity to be the *means* as well as the *ends* of political discourse. Mary McCarthy writes in *The Partisan Review* "a great abstract force governing our present journalism is a conceptualized picture of the reader... what our readers will take is a watchword... when an article today is adulterated, this is not done out of respect for the editor's prejudices..." If readers (viewers) have this power and are "a great abstract force," then the Left needs to use it to their advantage. In future editions of *Nebula*, I hope to do that and as I unravel the often complex and difficult abstractions that haunt our society and that need to be addressed, I will try to be "constructively reductive" and put them into simple mantras that can easily be printed on bumper stickers... and I implore those of you who are sympathetic to the working class Left to STEAL THIS MESSAGE.