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Mark W. Brewin: Celebrating Democracy. The Mass-Mediated Ritual of Election Day

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Hörfunk und Fernsehen

Mark W. Brewin: Celebrating Democracy. The Mass-Mediated Ritual of Election Day

New York: Peter Lang 2008, 331 S., ISBN 978-0-8204-8641-3, € 70,70

When Barak Obama was declared the victor in the 2008 Presidential Election, the significance of his win was underlined by the public celebrations which followed in Grant Park, Chicago and on the streets of Harlem and Washington. Americans across the country danced in the streets, embraced strangers and screamed for joy. While this was an unusual response to victory on Election Day in recent years, for the first half of America's democratic history, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spectacular public displays of electoral elation and despair involving bonfires, riots and drunken merrymaking were the norm.

Mark W. Brewin in his book *Celebrating Democracy* has decided to focus on the history of Election Day, by which he means the moment when voting takes place, when the declarations of individual citizens concerning their choice for political representatives are sent out, accumulated, and then represented back to them as a collective decision of the people, as a mediated ritual. The importance of the Election Day ritual is the particular message that the event sends about the identity and character of the public itself. He has chosen the history of Election Day in Philadelphia, the city which gave birth to the American Revolution, as representative of the rest of the country, for studying the changes in the way the citizenry has "performed an image of itself, for itself, through the means of the democratic vote." (S.1)

He defines ritual as "a set of, public, communally performed, and rule governed acts, set apart in time and space from the mundane and every day, which effect a change in reality through symbolic rather than physical means." (S.7) He also points out that these rituals are mediated and that media events serve as moments for members of society to reflect upon their common existence. The media do this by producing an imaginary space in which the ritual takes place and then provide an interpretive framework to explain what the event is supposed to mean. One of Brewin's main conclusions is that as technological advances have changed the media, the interpretive framework and therefore the interpretation itself has changed too.

Philadelphians in colonial times lived in a world which historians have described as deferential, that means conservative and hierarchical, where the social stratification is seen as a natural and just outcome of inherent personal superiorities. The voting performance by freeholders and freemen (women, African Americans, slaves and servants were excluded) for the provincial assembly was a clear affirmation of the right of the ruling class to rule. The vote was done personally and therefore publicly, at the city's Court House where physical intimidation and

violence were common and electoral success was marked by cheers, street bonfires and raucous drinking (and more violence). The ballots were produced by individual candidates and parties. The mass media of the age – broadsides, pamphlets and newspapers – played a minor role.

By the early 1790s, the development of a national party system had begun. Ideological loyalty, expressed publicly in marches or by wearing feathered cockades (rosettes) began to replace property ownership as the public guarantor of the reliable citizen. Events such as the Fourth of July celebrations became segregated, partisan events. The local party politicians would choose which slate of candidates would be on the ‘ticket’. However, the presidential vote identified the voter as part of a national public and the press allowed this local action to be understood as a national clash of forces. For those who still believed that politics should be a disinterested search for the common good, the existence of parties was “an affront” (S.48).

In the first half of the nineteenth century partisan politics became more important. On Election Day, under the close watch of party leaders, a man could see what sort of people supported democracy and particular tribal loyalties. Transparent declarations through flags, parades, bets, fistfights and fires “reinforced the messages that the ritual embodied, of membership in, and dedication to, a distinctive American identity” (S.102) which was partisan and contested. Newspapers, often extremely biased, did not simply reflect Election Day but were now fundamental to its character. And as a national ritual, it only existed in the pages of the newspapers. However, by defining the contest as one only between two parties, both controlled by a small political elite, women and racial minorities in particular were excluded.

Election Days of the late nineteenth century were probably the most dramatic and spectacular because political parties, driven by the need to get voters to the polls (which were now based on a ward system), manufactured a campaign and an Election Day which combined both politics and entertainment. Violence, often racially motivated, became more of a problem, as did corruption (intimidation and bribery). The invention of a steam-operated, mechanized press meant a variety of newspapers and magazines could be published in even greater numbers and the introduction of the telegraph communicated election results from around the country faster. Voters would gather outside newspaper offices for the latest electoral returns, and the newspapers themselves would organise firework displays and parties. The introduction of the Australian Ballot, which was printed by the state and provided at the polls to the voters who then completed them in secret, made coercion more difficult. Voters had to be affected before they reached the polls. Mass media became central to this effort which meant only individuals and parties with considerable resources could campaign successfully.

Technological advances in the twentieth century changed the nature of Election Day and public celebrations started disappearing from the streets. Radio, which provided results, entertainment and later analysis to the home, was not solely

responsible for reduced political involvement. Women's suffrage had a civilising effect on the manly behaviour exhibited at election time. The rise of both political objectivity and consumer culture resulted in Election Day coverage by newspapers that "increasingly appealed to the reader as spectator, not as an active participant in the building of the political authority." (S.159) The Republican 'machine's forty-year dominance of politics, nationally as well as in Philadelphia, reduced the interest in participating on Election Day, and it was not until Roosevelt, who injected a sense amongst his supporters and opponents that important issues were up for debate, did passionate politics return.

Obviously, it is the advent of television which fundamentally changed the way Election Day was performed and its message. Television transformed the Election Day experience from a visceral one, where you jostled elbows with your fellow voters, to pictures on a screen. The most important race became which station presented the outcome first. Private Election Day parties continued to exist but were "performances of social status put on for the benefit of a select group of friends." (S.180) Until Obama, it was only the huge post-election, campaign parties which were covered by the mass media. Mass media replaced acting with watching others act. However, television brought new controversies. Did early reporting before all the polls were closed affect the end results? Did corporate media have its own agenda which marginalised 'outsiders' like Ralph Nader? Were the networks creating "consensual politics in which real differences between parties were either ignored or even considered illegitimate" (S.197)? Fortunately, the disputed election of George W. Bush in 2000, his polarising effect in office and the charisma of Barack Obama have seemingly stimulated the electorate again.

Brewin's conclusions makes very interesting reading. He believes "the struggle over media practice is always at the same time a struggle over social power." (S.231) That the importance of Election Day is the ritualistic role which provides an arena in which the meaning of democracy, citizenship and liberty takes place, yet is a means of controlling not only the population, but political debate. He points out that social hierarchy has not disappeared from American life or Election Day but it is no longer articulated because industrial societies cannot afford to communicate the central tensions within these societies as it could lead to "revolution, not affirmation." (S.237) Hopefully, he will be reassured that the passions Bush and Obama have inspired in the last presidential elections will reinvigorate Election Day so its role is not to orchestrate an abstract and bloodless face of power celebrating its rule over a vague and diffuse public.

The book is well-researched, drawing on contemporary journalistic accounts, biographical and autobiographical material, election reports and private letters. Indeed the appendix covering notes and references is over eighty pages long. However, if truth be told, you can extract the majority of relevant information by reading only the introduction and final chapter/conclusion of the book. The book is written in a clear if slightly unexciting style, the readers' interest sustained by the accounts of the more exotic Election Day practices.

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