With all due respect to T. S. Eliot, I do not know whether I have measured out my life with coffee spoons, but I have certainly measured it out with elections. As an American by birth, I can better recall where I have been in life by thinking about U.S. national elections. It started when I stayed up late to celebrate when a fellow Roman Catholic and trade union supporter won the 1960 election and it descended into a near abyss in 2004 with the second coming of “W.,” which found me lying in bed after midnight refreshing my laptop screen over and over again in the faint hope that the Ohio vote total might shift to Kerry and make W. a one-term failure like his dad. Moreover, for as long as I can remember, elections have meant controversy. Did JFK steal the state of Illinois, where apparently the dead were an important voting bloc, and Texas too, where LBJ literally controlled the election machinery? Did W.'s people see that there were plenty of ballot boxes in the rich White neighbourhoods of Ohio, leaving Black voters and students to line up for the equivalent of a full work day just to cast a vote? Did Bush's buddies at Diebold cook the count with software that turned Kerry's exit-poll enthusiasm into another Democratic Party wake? Any temptation to react with Canadian smugness needs to be tempered by recent election results here, which demonstrated that you can win a riding for the losing party and join the cabinet of the winning party, which was crushed in that same riding. Or, even better, make it to Cabinet, as public works minister, no less, by passing on the election (too much work), buying land, and getting appointed to the Senate.

Yes, elections have always been controversial, and it is tempting to conclude that nothing has changed. But as Global Electioneering demonstrates with great breadth and careful scholarship, a lot has changed, and there is a lot for citizens and for communication scholars and practitioners to be concerned about.

In examining the entire election process worldwide, including funding, consulting, communication, and the use of new technology, Sussman has taken on a big project. But he is the right person to do it. Gerald Sussman is a political scientist who has spent years writing about media and new technology. He is currently Professor of Urban Studies and Planning and Speech Communication at Portland State University. In the book, he succeeds in describing how global capitalism in the post–Cold War era has changed the election process. Specifically, he shows how the extension of industrial principles and processes into spaces of life not previously incorporated or socially acceptable, what he calls hyperindustrialism, changed elections worldwide. The book begins with the U.S. and then examines how the U.S. has exported its election model to much of the rest of the world.

The basic thesis is that elites are worried about the international expansion of the public sphere and have mobilized the tools needed to manage it. Taking a cue from the 1975 report of the Trilateral Commission, which argued that the world needed to rein in “the excesses of democracy” or lose its representative institutions to anarchy or totalitarianism, contemporary government, corporate, and academic elites have re-fashioned the electoral process to create a managed public sphere.

The book begins with an overview of political communication in an age characterized by global markets, global corporations, and new, globe-spanning communication and information technologies. From there it explains the fundamental transformation in electoral politics. The American political campaign was once a craft; it rewarded skill in the rough-and-tumble of personal relationships, mobilizing support one face at a time in meetings at the door, in churches, in union halls, and in the many voluntary associations that, as de Tocqueville described, were filled with the people of this “nation of joiners.” But now Americans, as Robert Putnam (2000) tells us, are “bowling alone,” spending more hours than ever
in front of screens, and political campaigns have taken full advantage. Specifically, drawing on his work in labour analysis, Sussman demonstrates that elections have shifted from a craft to an industrial model. They are run by large companies that specialize in campaigns, selling their services to parties, organizations, and candidates, who are forced to raise large sums from corporate donors to pay for their services. Companies provide the same range of services that would go into marketing a new car, perfume, or beer, but they use a slightly different jargon: market research becomes polling; public relations becomes strategic information planning; product placement becomes a campaign event; and testimonials become endorsements. Like in industrial production, some campaigns can work under the old Fordist model of mass production/mass consumption, but increasingly they require the post-Fordist skills of customized production for niche markets. Whichever approach is used, as Sussman demonstrates by drawing on his extensive knowledge of new media, all forms of marketing, for perfumes and for candidates, now require a massive screen presence, including television, of course, but also increasingly the multimedia technologies of computer communication.

Sussman’s book is especially valuable because it demonstrates the global spread of the U.S. model of hyperindustrial electioneering, replacing the craft and local specificities of national election practices in Canada, the U.K., Europe, and Japan. With the full support of the U.S. government and major transnational companies, organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy spread the gospel of this elite-managed public sphere to control democracy’s “excesses” in Latin America, the nations of the former Soviet Union, and increasingly Asia and Africa. Although much of the book focuses on the structure and process of global electioneering, refreshingly, it adds profiles of some of the key figures, such as Karl Rove and George Carville, who have built this new system. Readers may feel that more attention could have been paid to the failures of the new system, which demonstrate that having the resources and strategies to manage the public sphere does not always guarantee success. (Witness Latin America, whose electoral systems have produced many left-of-centre victories in the early years of the new millennium.) Nevertheless, Global Electioneering provides a clearly written and very well-documented analysis in the tradition of some of our best political communication research. The discussion of much-needed reforms that concludes the book will offer students if not a roadmap out of this abyss, at least suggestions to help them design their own map.

References

Vincent Mosco
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