A Neo Marxist Approach to Political Campaigning

How might the president matter in the 21st century?

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In *Society Must Be Defended*, Michel Foucault argued that discipline in Western societies is achieved and organized in particular ways: “…the delicate machines of power cannot function unless knowledge, or rather knowledge apparatuses, are formed, organized, and put into circulation, and those apparatuses are not ideological trimming or edifices” (Foucault 33). In the United States, the culture industry is largely responsible for the production and circulation of knowledge. In the realm of politics, modern individuals access most of their information through mass media, and therefore the place and role of a candidate as “presidentiable” is socially constructed in the public sphere. Indeed, a political campaign is generally experienced through the lens of television, radio, newspapers and the Internet. However, journalists are often more interested in conflicts or scandals rather than substantial ideas, as political scientist Thomas Patterson explains in *Voter Competence*, and they are therefore less likely to report on content – such as laws and issue – than on context, personality or skills: “Research has shown that [controversies] received nearly as much coverage as substantive policy issues and in some cases even more” (Patterson 48). The public therefore tends pays attention to rhetoric rather than to details, and the political discourse has, over the years, been leaning towards Entertainment Politics.

Historically, the shift between a political communications based on issues to one based on image can be traced to the 1952 presidential election. Because the Republican Party knew that it could not win with the Party alone, it stressed the image of WW2 General Dwight Eisenhower rather than the Party itself, or tangible issues. They fabricated an image which, according to rhetorical theorist Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “…enabled voters vicariously to experience the supposedly hardy, healthy, heroic life of their candidate” (Jamieson 11). General Eisenhower was
rendered more human throughout the campaign, and was perceived by his audience as a father figure: loving, caring, knowledgeable and experienced. Such a strategy created a way in which the Republican could earn a populist vote to be elected to office, and thereby break the Democratic tradition. Eisenhower was well advised by the Madison Avenue public relation specialist Ben Duffy, who declined Stevenson’s invitation to debate during the campaign, as he knew that Ike did not have the required skills to debate Stevenson on television, or on radio as a matter of fact. TV advertising, however, allowed for the candidates to directly penetrate the living room of their audiences, and repetitively spread their messages. The Republicans understood the question of timing, and the ritual aspect of television. They chose to air their ads at times when people would be watching their favorite shows, and could therefore reach a broader and popular audience. The very short clips included a lot of repetition and got to the point without really discussing the issues, or the ideology the party but forced the personality traits of Eisenhower. The political ad “I Like Ike” is a short clip that had been produced by the Disney studios, which was cutting-edge in terms of technology.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TctDYRECE9o&feature=fvwrel
Dwight D Eisenhower 1952 I Like Ike Political Ad with Jingle

The music and the repetition of the catchy phrase “I Like Ike” made it linger in the minds of the American people. The different individuals, carrying sign and marching from the left towards the right of the screen embodies the change that was to come with Ike, as the donkeys representing the Democrats were passively watching the parade go by. Eventually a drawn portrait of Ike appeared on the screen, above Capitol Hill, in a bright shining sun. This clip is not discussing issues or the Republican Party, but it is appealing to the audience that may recognize themselves in the video, and hum the song as their day goes by.

Nowadays, culture has been turned into a commodity in a way in which the public itself has been affected, and segmented according to consumption patterns. While Eisenhower’s campaign team decided to air most of their short ads before a popular show “I Love Lucy” to specifically target a populist vote, the Internet has allowed for a debatably ethical collection of data to better package and “sell” a president to a specific audience. According to media theorist Bruce Gronbeck, this trend has had a great impact on modern society “In diving people by consumption patterns, advertisers have effectively used such patterns to foster as well as a divided culture (...) and different from folks with different consumption preferences” (Gronbeck 238). The public sphere transitioned from a space dedicated to politics and public opinion to an arena of public taste, where one doesn’t cast a vote but “likes” a webpage.
Technology mediated a discourse in which consumers replaced citizens; the conceptual realm of the public sphere shifted from ritualized consumption to a temporal architecture in which dates are landmarks for “togetherness”. The Republic and its citizens is constantly divided all throughout the campaign, but brought together by the Election Day.

These tensions create among the voters an alienation that brings many of them to say “It doesn’t matter who we elect, they are all the same anyway”. This is at this moment that we truly cave into, in David Foster Wallace’s words “our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness” for the benefit of the ruling class, and status quo. When the democratic process is slowed down, or as Hannah Arendt put it “when this light is extinguished by "credibility gaps" and "invisible government," by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality” it is the entire nation that becomes exploited by a system over which they feel they have no control over. I believe that great leadership does not only come from political leaders, it also must emanate from all citizens, that should recognize the humanity of their elected officials, and separate the function and the person behind it, the image and the
policies. To me, real unifying political action will come from the citizens, and start with education at a young age. Mandatory media criticism classes, paired with a close study of propaganda models in history classes will allow future citizens, and voters to grasp the tensions created by our media saturated environment, and recover agency over the system.

Beyond the tremendous place and importance of the President in the United States of America and in the entire world, it is the survival of the American democracy that is a stake. The true meaning of an election is the expression of ones voice, and the liberty to make choices in a global context where many voices are being silenced by the sound of machine guns.
Works Cited


