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REVIEW OF CARL BOGGS' *THE END OF POLITICS*:

Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere

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While reminiscent of works such as Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology* and Francis Fukuyama's well-known "end of history" thesis, *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere* (New York: Guilford P, 2000) in no way heralds the triumph of liberal democracy and free market capitalism. Rather than celebrating the supposed end of oppositional politics, Carl Boggs bemoans the loss of civic participation in the contemporary United States. Of course, he admits that corporate and state political activity continues to operate nearly unencumbered. He emphasizes, however, that this corporate political sphere fails to incorporate broad citizen participation, lacks citizen support, and generally operates only on behalf of corporate interests. To be sure, Boggs acknowledges the myriad grassroots organizations that thrive throughout the country; yet he adamantly believes that these organizations suffer from local emphases disconnected to larger national and global issues. Indeed, he further believes that the limitations of these organizations result from the kind of alienation and depoliticization caused by our increasingly corporatized culture. As Boggs sees it, retreat from the public sphere—whether by failing to participate or by participating within a specifically delimited, local, and isolated space—harms progressive ends. Because oppositional politics requires broad public dialogue in order to affect social change, it cannot be adequately performed within local, isolated, or private spaces. It is precisely this commitment to oppositional or transformational politics that motivates *The End of Politics'* critique of our current depoliticized society. Not surprisingly, Boggs hopes that his critique will motivate a renewed politicization of the public sphere.

Before proceeding, it will be helpful to review the major terms of this argument and how Boggs defines these terms. The major terms I find are: public sphere, politics, depoliticization, anti-politics, and corporatization. Boggs understands politics to be a tradition derived from the ancient Greeks and intimately related to individual self-fulfillment. Relying on Aristotle, Boggs argues that "politics constitutes a unique public sphere in which people come together, interact, make decisions, forge citizen bonds, carry out the imperatives of social change, and ultimately search for the good society" (7). More importantly, politics is the "source of broad human governance that is indispensable to the pursuit of meaning, direction, and purpose in life" (7). According to Boggs, "it is precisely this visionary and empowering sense of politics that seems to have vanished from the American landscape" (8). In its place lies a pervasively depoliticized culture. Depoliticization, or the process of corporatization resulting in an anti-political climate, occurs when individual interests and the individual good supercede the collective good.

Instead of a politics inspired by public dialogue and a sense of the collective good, Boggs contends that the disengaged public sphere operates under an ethos of anti-politics resulting from feelings of powerlessness, cynicism, and alienation. Within this ethos, political activity is devalued and private

activity takes its place. The 1970s roughly mark the transformation from politics to anti-politics. Boggs states that the "precarious social and political space won through hard battles has progressively narrowed since the late 1970s, when the public sphere became increasingly subject to the ravages of corporate colonization" (14). It is at this historical moment that corporate and state power increasingly begin to transfer "public anger and frustration outside the political terrain, toward more immediate micro, psychologically gratifying, and typically privatized modes of resistance" (14). The process whereby this transformation takes place can be best understood as the corporatization of the public sphere. For Boggs, corporatization refers to "'corporations' very growing presence in the economy, their extensive lobbies and influence over legislative activity, their ownership and control of the mass media, their preponderant influence over election campaigns, their capacity to secure relief from myriad regulatory controls, their massive public relations apparatus, their general subsidies to the two major parties and the convention process, and so forth" (9). Corporatization erodes the public sphere by focusing on the individual rather than the social and emphasizing private, corporate interests rather than the general, public good. Thus, corporatization causes the depoliticization of the public sphere because it promotes private consumption, emphasizes individualism, and ignores the social good. Finally, according to Boggs, the public sphere includes electoral activity as well as the space in which diverse social movements form and constitute the terrain of public life; the public sphere is the glue that cements individual and social concerns to administrative regimes like the state or corporations. Corporatization, depoliticization, and anti-politics have thrown the public sphere into deep crisis; it is this crisis that lies at the heart of Boggs's analyses.

Yet perhaps Boggs's critique of corporate depoliticization relies on an overly romantic historical narrative of the Western democratic political tradition. He claims that "the special tradition of politics that goes back to the ancient Greeks also embodies much of what is noble, creative, and transformative in the human experience" (95). And further argues that "the Greeks upheld the supreme virtue of a uniquely 'civic' or 'popular' life in which it would be possible to build community and citizenship in a world of evolving shared involvements" (95). His historical narrative moves from Plato and Aristotle through Rousseau and eventually to the United States in political figures such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine. Valorizing these figures and the tradition they represent, Boggs argues that "the emergence of the nation-state in the late-eighteenth century produced near universal norms of citizenship, consensual governance, political rights, and national identity" (97). Although late-eighteenth century democracy failed to include women, slaves, and many non-white citizens, he claims that this democratic tradition produced "a further broadening of citizenship as [these] previously excluded groups" gained suffrage and representation (97). According to his narrative, the US was once a space where "civic associations flourished and the sense of citizen obligation, while clearly limited, was taken far more seriously than in most European countries" (42). In other words, there was once a public sphere in which citizens were encouraged to participate and a sense that such participation had meaning. It should be noted, however, that this enthusiastic historical account runs the risk of erasing the concrete connections between the spread of democracy and the expansion of the capitalist marketplace.

Further eliding the collusion between democracy and capitalism, Boggs often directly opposes democratic interests against capitalist interests. He claims, for instance, that as history progresses, corporate interests slowly overshadow the ideals of democratic participation. By limiting the scope of the debate through media-ownership and setting the political agenda through financial support of candidates, lobbyists, and special interest groups, this turn toward corporatization signals the initial deterioration of the public sphere. In order to illustrate this point, Boggs cites the way that media skews news coverage in favor of corporate interests. For example, while corporate downsizing and the elimination of middle-class jobs have been skyrocketing, "public discussion of work and joblessness in the United States has been absurdly narrow" (51). In a second example, Boggs claims that "as corporate governmental elites agitated for increased military outlays throughout the postwar years, they simultaneously renewed their assault on 'big government,' the welfare state, and public regulation" (57). In other words, the government and its budget are cut when its programs work on behalf of the poor-, working-, and middle-classes, but its budgets are expanded and state intervention increased when they work on behalf of corporate wealth. In lieu of critical

public debates over these issues, we are left with media sound bites that Boggs tells us "distort, perhaps even obliterate, specifically public concerns" (10). Thus, the ideal picture of democratic political participation that Boggs paints has, he tells us, suddenly washed away since the late 1970s. Boggs believes that grassroots political organizing since the late 1970s has constructed itself according to personal identity and local agendas. This shift toward the individual and away from the political is, to a great extent, symptomatic of increased corporatization.

As part of this larger trend of corporatization, Boggs argues that corporations and their interests have actually restructured the public sphere by taking "over many of the functions of political decision making, including investment and allocation of resources" (69). That is to say, "the 'public good,' insofar as it lives on in liberal discourse as a viable construct, does not exist outside of what elites may regard as contributing to efficient, pragmatic, and marketable outcomes" (70). Not only are general citizens left out of the equation, so are national governments. Globalization tends to metaphorically erase national boundaries and reassign power to multinational corporations. In turn, these corporations transform individual agency from the public sphere of political participation to the private sphere of individual consumption. According to Boggs, "the seductive power of the mass media, especially television, in shaping perceptions of self and social reality points to the precipitous decline in other sources of identity: neighborhood, community, religion, class, political ideology" (85). In this way, says Boggs, "'politics' is reduced to questions of style, ritual, and image where the hyperreal tends to override substantive political debates and concerns" (85).

Adapting to the post-1970s corporate culture, numerous contemporary grassroots organizations continue to favor the personal over the political. From Boggs's point of view, these movements are "in part driven by the popular will to overcome alienation by nonpolitical means, which may itself be conditioned by deeply ingrained feelings of cynicism, despair, and powerlessness" (129). These organizations embody a form of antistatism and espouse values that have "deep roots in American history, such as personal over collective modes of consumption, a preoccupation with the marketplace, populist distrust of elites and bureaucracy, and a frontier-style individualism" (130). This antistatism is evident through movements against the welfare state and toward privatization of public functions like schools and prisons. Nonetheless, this response is rarely a systemic challenge to governmental power, and often manifests as an attack on individuals or individual programs.

This kind of general cynicism and contempt for the government has motivated individuals to seek meaning and fulfillment in places other than through traditional citizenship. Popular belief in prophecies, mystical ideals, and gangs represent some of these diverse places. For instance, "much like cults and sects, youth-based gangs can furnish solidarity where it is otherwise absent" (142). Similarly, on the right, exist many dispersed militias—particularly in the western states—whose "struggle for local control is strangely directed against only the national state, not big business or the military" (147). These militias and other organizations use "the familiar American idea of disenfranchised outsiders fighting for identity, recognition, and local democratic control against a distant, impersonal, and bureaucratic government" (146). Boggs argues that "militia members comprise a diffuse subculture—more an alternative way of life than an explicit ideology or political grouping" (149). He further identifies such disparate movements as religious organizations, like the Moonies and the Promise Keepers, and terrorist acts as all part of this cultural isolationist move away from the public sphere into the private sphere. It might not be reassuring to note that the only thing preventing these movements from developing into national fascism, according to Boggs, is their refusal "to work in tandem with big capital, the military, and a whole spectrum of governing elites whose agenda is already rationalized" (160). However, because all these organizations share such contempt for the government and the public sphere, it would be almost impossible to translate any one of these movements into a national agenda for social change—fascist or democratic.

Of course, there exist many other movements that attempt to organize communities around more positive individual participation and consumption in local communities. Nevertheless, Boggs argues that these

post-1970s organizations have embraced "consciousness over structures, civil society over state, the cultural over the political" (169). This coincides with the replacement of collective agency with individualism. History has moved "in favor of an ethos stressing individual strivings over the general interest, material aims over ethical vision" (116). In this category, Boggs includes new-age groups, therapeutic groups, self-help organizations, local-based community organizations, environmentalism, and even urban uprisings. He places these apparently unrelated movements together because they all have "a thoroughly depoliticized approach to social change" (206). As evidence of their depoliticized nature, he cites the absence of a larger political agenda, an isolationist stance, and the privileging of culture and the individual over politics and the collective. While Boggs argues that these organizations often disrupt the status quo, he believes that their insular and enclave mentality prevents larger change. Boggs finds that these organizations signify "not so much a new politics as an end of politics, where authoritarian rule, social hierarchy, and the capitalist market coexist with a growing devaluation of the public sphere" (177). According to Boggs, "as seductive therefore as the agenda of community organizing might be, in a world of increasingly concentrated economic and political power [local organizing] will always be inadequate—and could turn out to be counterproductive" (193).

One reason, according to Boggs, for this localism is that "postmodernism has refocused attention away from the macro realm (the global system, or the national state, or economy), toward a 'micro politics' grounded in the immediate, local, and more tangible elements of everyday life" (209). His most pronounced complaint against postmodernists is that "all the chaos, fragmentation, and indeterminacy that is seen as a defining feature of the crisis of modernity in fact refers only to the fate of oppositional forces in civil society" (210). The ignored space at the center, occupied by the government and multinational corporations, remains strong, concentrated, and to a certain extent unified. According to Boggs, corporatization, safe outside the focus of postmodern criticism, "has never been effectively subverted through the proliferation of micro centers of resistance or the extreme affirmation of diversity and multiculturalism that has become so central to American public discourse over the past two decades" (222). Like the local organizations he critiques, Boggs also critiques postmodern theorists as anti-political because they fail to create "a linkage of immediate struggles to long-range goals, the development of a conscious, planned framework of action connected to *societal* issues and priorities, to a broadening of social governance" (227). What postmodernism lacks, according to Boggs, is a dialectical relationship between the micro- and macro-levels. Boggs argues that unlike postmodernism, "a true politics of identity requires more: it suggests a dialectical relationship between group and public interests, between micro and macro realms, between local and societal arenas of participation" (236). Postmodernism, he argues, is at least partially responsible for the fragmentation, the localism, the individualism, and the privileging of culture over politics that Boggs contends is the cornerstone of our current depoliticized society.

Ultimately, Boggs argues that for national elites, the government, and multinational corporations, ideologies, unified agendas, and politics continue to thrive while everyday citizens take refuge in various isolated, fragmented, and individual anti-political movements. However, through his analysis of the metaphorical end of politics, Boggs attempts to articulate a concept of politics that "holds out prospects for a more empowering, participatory, transformative legacy compatible with an enlarged public sphere and the subversion of corporate hegemony" (252). Such a recovery of politics "demands nothing less than a revitalized citizenry prepared to occupy the public space that has either been neutralized or enveloped by corporate colonization" (253). Even though *The End of Politics* clearly critiques many diverse local movements and organizations as depoliticized because they fail to make their interests intelligible within a national or global context, Boggs nevertheless believes that such local political movements have promoted positive changes and "have opened up public debate, inspired some novel if not particularly radical programs, and generally helped to broaden the political terrain" (265). In order for these organizations to become politicized, they would need to adopt and disseminate a core set of beliefs and strategies along with some kind of national or global agenda. The current movements—many of which this book critiques for their individual, isolationist, and localized positionalities—would have to create coalitions and begin to "unify their social, largely prepolitical, struggles around distinctly common, public aims such as social

equality, democratization of civic life, full employment, universal health care, and sustainable forms of development" (278). According to Boggs, such coalitions would allow these disparate organizations to make connections beyond their immediate, local agendas and to eventually forge national strategies against corporate hegemony.

While this book calls attention to the limited nature of many current political and cultural movements, it does so with more than a trace of nostalgia for the history of Western participatory democracy. Certainly Boggs is cognizant of the problems of constructing an overly nostalgic and romantic past. Indeed, he sees nostalgic trends as dangerously close to the isolationism he critiques in this text: he states that alienation from the public sphere "often gives rise not only to privatized retreat but to romanticized journeys into nostalgia" (37). While this knowledge fails to keep Boggs from falling victim to his own romanticized historical narrative, perhaps the most glaring omission from his text might have prevented this nostalgia. Boggs never mentions Jürgen Habermas nor his important text, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. According to Habermas, the term "public sphere" originated sometime in the eighteenth century as part of the emerging civil society of wage labor and commodity exchange. The public sphere, then, is a term historically embedded in the development of capitalism. Of course, the idea of the public, or the *polis*, has a much longer history dating back to the Greeks. However, since Boggs chose to interrogate the public sphere in decline *because* of capitalism, Habermas's argument that the public sphere acts in complicity with the needs of capitalism seems to be seriously under question in this text. The significantly different understanding of the public sphere that operates in this book deserves further attention, justification, and historical grounding. Contextualizing against Habermas seems the natural place to start.

While the larger terms of his analysis—especially public sphere and corporate colonization—are often wielded with imprecise and alternating definitions, Boggs's larger argument is well taken: local organizing is indeed a limited political venue. The detailed attention given to these supposedly depoliticized organizations is not, however, matched with a detailed explanation of the larger socioeconomic trends of globalization. Indeed, one would think that the trends in globalization should have significant impact on the political sphere. Yet instead of articulating a new vision of politics for this globalized society, Boggs often falls back on old political strategies. Perhaps closer attention to these larger political and theoretical trends might reshape his political vision and offer more hope for working against "the end of politics."

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