Introduction

Why a *Critical* Reader?

"A long habit of not thinking a thing *wrong,* gives it a superficial appearance of being *right*... "

—Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

In January of 1776, Thomas Paine voiced Americans' growing aspirations for freedom and independence with his radical call for an end to the monarchical rule of the British Empire. His pamphlet *Common Sense* was a phenomenal success, with upward of 150,000 copies printed, reaching an estimated one million people, unheard of numbers for his day.[1] Paine's straightforward message found a receptive audience among ordinary people, whose often inchoate opposition to the King was impeded by entrenched deference to royal authority. With fiery reasoning in support of dissent and republican government, he cut through the haze of "what was," and crystallized a vision of "what could be."

In January of 2000, the world entered a new millennium. If a contemporary Thomas Paine were to issue a radical call for "common sense" today, would the public even be able to hear it? We wonder. As introductory students of politics, the lessons of eighteenth century America may seem like ancient history as you ponder political life in the twenty-first. The revolutions in political thinking that punctuated the end of the last century occurred elsewhere. We are now more than a decade removed from such seismic shifts as the collapse of the Berlin wall and the break-up of Eastern Europe as a Soviet satellite, the coordination into a single market of the economies of the European Community nations, and the demise of Communism in Russia and, albeit more slowly, in China. Historic world events swept away the political, economic, military, and ideological basis of the Cold War, and with it much of what we knew as foreign affairs in the post-World War II period. In the wake of these breathtakingly rapid transformations, we have been treated to the predictable chorus of political pundits and "experts" in the mass media reassuring us that recent history confirms the universal appeal and unquestionable rightness of American versions of democracy and corporate capitalism. The tide of history is going our way, we are told. Why swim against it?

Source: [1]For a lively discussion of the role of Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* in galvanizing the revolutionary spirit in America, see Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985, chapter 4.

With this as a political and cultural backdrop, the need for a critical reader in American politics may seem less than compelling to you. As distinctions between the two political parties continue to diminish, the possibility of posing alternatives to the status quo may appear nonexistent. Indeed, the very idea of political alternatives may seem moot. In the immediate aftermath of President Clinton's reelection in 1996 and the Republican retention of the congressional majorities, the two parties had so successfully dissolved into one on core issues that conservative columnist and TV commentator George Will was moved to offer the following observation of Clinton:

> "the man who campaigned more conservatively than Bush now proposes to govern more conservatively than Reagan. Washington may die of boredom unless there is forced busing to achieve ideological balance."[2]

Will's wit should not be allowed to obscure the truth it seeks to illuminate: the United States increasingly has taken on the characteristics of a one-party state.

The election of 2000 only confirmed this troubling atrophy of democracy. With Democratic Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush Jr. straining to spin tiny fibers of difference into dark blue suits of policy difference, only Green Party candidate and lifelong consumer advocate Ralph Nader articulated what great numbers of Americans already felt: the two-party emperor has no clothes. With corporate control of the political economy expanding, democracy in America is an endangered species, threatened by a growing "democracy gap." As Nader pointed out in a speech announcing his presidential candidacy:

> This control by the corporate government over our political government is creating a widening *democracy gap.* Active citizens are left shouting their concerns over a deep chasm between them and their government.[3]

Even those who seek to benefit from it, and whose political work seeks to downplay it, tacitly acknowledge this gap between citizens and government. Reflecting on the 2000 GOP national convention in Philadelphia, former Chair of the Republican National Committee Haley Barbour offered the following insight about the proceedings:

> "It's all propaganda. It's all a TV show. It's not news, but it's hugely important information for the American people."[4]

Party leaders cynically offer the people made-for-TV, feel-good spectacles devoid of real decisions and real political meaning—an empty combination of pabulum and propaganda that continues into the general election and beyond. Hugely important? From whose perspective?

Americans clearly are not happy with the political and economic conformity that confronts them. Among the many indicators of this discontent is the stark reality of an abysmal 49 percent turnout rate in the 1996 election and an only slightly higher rate in 2000. In mid-term elections far fewer eligible voters cast ballots. Although America fancies itself as the greatest democracy on earth, in fact, the United States remains

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Source: [2]George Will, "Clinton and the balanced budget." *Boston Globe*, November 15, 1996.

Source: [3]Ralph Nader, "Statement of Ralph Nader Announcing His Candidacy for the Green Party's Nomination for President." www.votenader.com, Washington, D.C., February 21, 2000.

Source: [4]R.W. Apple Jr., "No Decisions, No Drama." *New York Times*, August 1, 2000.

mired at or near the bottom of all industrialized nations in terms of voter participation. Other, more hopeful signs of discontent abound. In Seattle in November of 1999, and again in April of 2000 in Washington, D.C., tens of thousands of people from around the world came together to voice growing opposition to the World Trade Organization and other global financial institutions whose decisions set the rules of economic life far removed from citizen input. This nascent social movement—uniting students, environmentalists, working people, and other activists against the elite agenda of corporate capital—has shed light on the often secretive world of international economic decision making, raising deep doubts about the presumed wisdom of globalization. We strongly believe that the American political system today has a superficial appearance of rightness, a veneer of public ritual and familiarity beneath which lies tremendous private (and increasingly public) discontent. Moreover, we sense students and teachers are interested in a challenging analysis of American politics that includes alternatives to conventional liberal and conservative approaches which, we are all taught, mark the limits of "legitimate" debate. In our text we ask you to move beyond these socialized limits in an attempt to span the "democracy gap."

The arrival of the twenty-first century has brought stunning change, and with it has come both the dark possibilities and bright opportunities that jointly mark all periods of crisis and transition. Yet at the same time, the list of pressing problems facing the United States—indeed the world—remains long, and finding real solutions that transcend patriotic rhetoric, cynical presidential promises, nationalistic hubris, and 10-second sound bites necessarily will involve a broadening of political debate. U.S. involvement in Bosnia, Haiti, Somalia, and in other regional conflicts continues to be a source of contention as the nation struggles to adjust to its changed military role in the post-Cold War world. The bombing of Iraq and Yugoslavia by President Clinton raised serious questions about the relationship between the use of force and the authenticity of a president's stated humanitarian ends. Specific issues here at home also are troubling, among them: the growing gap between the rich and the poor, with the top 1 percent of households now owning more wealth than the bottom 95 percent, a stagnating standard of living for working and middle class Americans during the Reagan-Bush era that continued even amidst the much-celebrated "economic boom" of the Clinton years; the soaring wage differential between CEOs and average factory workers, which resulted in CEOs earning 435 times what an average worker earned in 1999, up from 1980, when CEOs made 41 times as much; job insecurity that has accompanied the phenomenon of corporate "downsizing" and the growing power of multinational corporations in the brave new world of global "free trade"; the crisis of environmental degradation, which is reaching potentially cataclysmic proportions globally; the burgeoning financial crisis which includes, but is not limited to, both the national debt and more acutely, personal consumer debt; the well-documented inadequacies of the American educational system, which is second to many others worldwide; the health care crunch that has left upwards of 45 million Americans without any medical coverage and an equal number with woefully inadequate coverage; troubling high crime rates; and the persistence of poverty (especially among children), racism, and sexism, as barriers to basic equality. Perhaps more unsettling still is the underlying cancerous trend of popular non-participation in the political process due to widespread apathy, despair, and lack of confidence people have in their political

leaders and institutions. Most Americans barely can bring themselves to go to the polls every four years to select a president, let alone play a greater role as full citizens. They have, in effect, given up on politics.

These and a host of other problems confront the student of politics. In the face of such formidable dilemmas, you are left with a few possible responses. One common response is *resignation,* expressed in such adages as "You can't fight city hall" and "Don't rock the boat." Many students tell us they can see basic injustices but feel powerless to change anything. The continuing durability of this view is ironic, though, given the sweeping and rapid late-twentieth century changes we have seen in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, South Africa, and China.

Another response available to you is the *pluralist* interpretation of political life, which encourages piecemeal problem solving and an incremental view of change. Closely linked to an inherited cultural assumption about politics and power, the pluralist model of politics dominates contemporary political science. Pluralism rests on the view of society as a collection of groups, which compete over various policy areas. Through these groups, or acting as individuals through other democratic freedoms such as voting rights, representative institutions, and civil liberties, people can negotiate and compromise in an open political process. Group conflict is considered fair as long as the government serves as an unbiased umpire, maintaining a level playing field for all groups. Power is said to be diffuse so that no one group has unfair advantages. When necessary, reforms occur as groups succeed (or fail) in having their ideas triumph over competing ideas. And the end result of this pluralist interaction is understood to reasonably approximate "the public interest." On a pluralist reading of politics, the system may have its flaws, but none are so fatal that the system itself is called into question. The pluralist understanding of American politics is a relatively comfortable one. For it allows students to retain the belief that the political process is open enough, and sufficiently fluid, to adapt to virtually any contingency without changing the basic power relations of the political economy. Moreover, pluralists define "politics" narrowly—as what *government* does—so that the model overlooks other arenas of power, among them corporate capital.

We contend that neither resignation nor pluralist incrementalism will help you make sense of the American political landscape. A third, more critical, approach is warranted, one that challenges existing power relations. As currently practiced, politics speaks largely to the concerns of the already wealthy and influential. The political system does not offer the hope of a better life for most Americans, but rather leaves unquestioned a structure of power and privilege that endures regardless of which party controls Congress and the White House. In American political history, this kind of critical questioning often has been championed though the collective action of social movements, a point emphasized by many authors in this volume.

Our anthology seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the need to rethink and broaden the range of political and economic options facing the country. For many of you this may be your first exposure to dissenting political orientations, which are marginalized, or rendered invisible, in the mass media and most college textbooks. Within political science, the field of American politics is awash in textbooks and readers that assume an orthodox pluralist perspective, or provide a small sampling of differing viewpoints (though uniformly still heavily weighted toward the mainstream) on a series of issues of the day. Against this current, we adopt a critical stance, which challenges conventional

self-congratulatory accounts of the American political system. We draw articles from the rich literature of radical scholarship, along with selected mainstream pieces, which add texture to the more critical interpretation.

The book is divided into three sections. Part I examines the structure underlying political life, a structure that profoundly shapes and constrains the political choices available to us. The chapters in this section emphasize the interconnections between the political economy, ideological and cultural beliefs, and the structure of the state. Part II considers the "nuts and bolts" of political institutions and processes. Its four chapters closely parallel material found in almost all introductory textbooks and readers, albeit from a direction that contributes to a critical understanding of the political status quo by situating those institutions within the deeper structure outlined in Part I. Part III moves beyond the institutions to explore where the nation is heading, and where it *should* be heading: politics and *vision,* if you will. Selected foreign and domestic policy challenges are explored, and then we ask you to ponder the implications of the foregoing analysis for your own life, as a responsible citizen. All readings in these nine chapters are followed by Discussion Questions, a feature intended to get you thinking about the implications of the readings. We also have included a list of Resources for Further Study, a compilation of the addresses, phone numbers, and web sites of many of the leading organizations and publications that offer a critical perspective on American politics and economics. Finally, we have included in an appendix three classic political documents whose importance must be considered in any critical analysis.

While there are many ways to use our reader in introductory courses, we believe it may be most useful as an analytic complement to any of the myriad conventional textbooks on the market. It is through the competition of ideas that you will develop your capacity to think freely and critically. Our alternative perspective—which questions the very roots of political, economic, and ideological power in the United States—grows out of a positive belief that the current distribution of power and resources seriously impedes freedom, equality, and democracy, in the fullest sense of these terms. As proponents of real political participation and social justice, we critique the system in order to improve it when possible, and change it when necessary.

With these thoughts in mind, we frankly hope our reader will make you feel uncomfortable, shake you up a bit, and ultimately stimulate you to ask deep questions about the American political and economic system. Our goal in this sense is a radical one, for we ask that in your study of American politics you "go to the root causes," the very definition of the word "radical." A nation is not a healthy democracy simply because its politicians, corporate leaders, and the mass media constantly say it is, or because other forms of more authoritarian control have tumbled down worldwide. And the democratic ideal is not close to being realized if the people continually are asked to settle for a political system that is merely "pretty good," or if at election time voters find themselves holding their noses and voting for the "lesser of two evils," or if the answers to our problems assumed to lie in policies of a "moderate" direction. For the legacy of Thomas Paine also reminds us that

> A thing moderately good is not so good as it ought to be. Moderation in temper is always a virtue; but moderation in principle is always a vice. (1792 Letter)

A truly healthy polity can thrive only when ordinary people have meaningful control over the decisions that directly affect their lives. Nader refers to such control as "deep

democracy," which facilitates peoples' best efforts to achieve social justice and self-reliance.[5] Democracy in the fullest sense should provide the societal context within which people's "instinct for freedom" can flourish, as Noam Chomsky has written in *Language and Politics:*

> I would like to believe that people have an instinct for freedom, that they really want to control their own affairs. They don't want to be pushed around, ordered, oppressed, etc., and they want a chance to do things that make sense, like constructive work in a way that they control, or maybe control together with others. I don't know any way to prove this. It's really a hope about what human beings are like—a hope that if social structures change sufficiently, those aspects of human nature will be realized.[6]

We share the hope of these two modern-day Thomas Paines, a hope that is animated by a spirit Paine would have appreciated. Its realization—and the empowerment that would accompany it—is what informed, truly democratic citizenship is supposed to be about. We welcome feedback from students and teachers so we may learn whether this reader has helped you develop the analytic skills necessary to bring this hope closer to fruition.

Source: [5]Ralph Nader, "Acceptance Statement for the Green Party Nomination for President of the United States." www.votenader.com, Denver, June 25, 2000.

Source: [6]Noam Chomsky, *Language and Politics*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1988, p. 756.

PART I STRUCTURE

If the foundation of your house is cracked and starting to weaken, it makes little sense to address the problem by applying a fresh coat of paint that would merely conceal the underlying reality of decay. In our view, the American political system is a lot like a house with an unstable foundation. While the possibility of collapse certainly is not imminent, the structure of the American political economy, and the ideology that sustains it, is showing signs of severe stress. Moreover, this structure belies the cherished pluralist assumption (discussed in our Introduction) that our political system is one of open, fluid competition among groups. The inherent structural advantages, and disadvantages, accorded various groups significantly bias the political and economic system toward the interests of those who wield great power.

At the outset we must acknowledge that the concept of *structure* is itself quite muddled. Mainstream political scientists often use the term "structure" in a shallow sense when discussing the institutions of government, thus equating structure with the formal machinery of politics. This reduces structure to the institutional balance of power between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. While these institutional interactions obviously merit our attention, the structure-as-institutions approach ignores the deeper structure of power within which institutions operate.

In Part I we explore this deep structure of American politics, with three chapters focusing on the primary structural components of political economy, ideology, and state-constitutional arrangements. Taken as a whole they challenge you to consider whether the tensions inherent in the relationship between democracy as a political concept, and capitalism as a form of economic organization, may in fact constitute a *problem* for the nation, not the solution to our problems, as we are socialized to believe. Are capitalism and a meaningful degree of democracy really compatible, or is capitalist democracy an oxymoron? Does our political culture enable us to consider carefully a wide range of alternative policy directions in the United States? If not, are we as "free" as we like to think? Why is the power of the state so closely connected to the private power of large economic entities? Does the U.S. Constitution strengthen this connection, or provide ways to challenge it? To what extent have social movements been able to constrain and change this structure? These and many other troubling questions flow from a close reading of the selections in Part I.

Together these three structural components form the basic context—the playing field—within which political institutions operate. Understanding this structure will help you make sense of what government institutions do, and why problems so often seem to persist regardless of what policies are pursued in Washington. And it will help you come to grips with the pressures that impinge upon the foundations of American politics as a new century begins.

Chapter 1
Democracy and Political Economy

Politics is much more than government. Underlying this book of readings is the conviction that politics involves all relationships of power, whether they be economic, social, or cultural, as well as the interrelationship of government institutions. In their accounts of American politics, many political scientists focus on the Constitution and the three branches of government it established more than 200 years ago. We include these traditional subjects, but place them in a broader context that, in our view, will help you to understand better their actual workings and significance. Given our approach, it should not seem strange that we begin a book on American politics with what appears to be an economic focus.

Our first set of readings emphasizes the closely interwoven connection between democracy and political economy and the importance of understanding our capitalist system if we are to understand our politics. In the late eighteenth century, political economy was a common sense way of thinking for Alexander Hamilton and other Founding Fathers, as we will see in chapter 3. But in the twentieth century the study of economics and politics became institutionally separated in American colleges and in academic discourse more generally. In recent years this conceptual chasm has been challenged from a variety of perspectives. The selections in chapter 1 represent a revival of a broader, integrated analysis of American politics that challenges us to think critically about the relationship of capitalism and democracy. All of the authors in this chapter should help you to see politics as much broader than what goes on in government, and as powerfully shaped and constrained by the dynamics of our economy. When this is understood it is difficult to be satisfied with a definition of democracy confined to the presence of elections and formal rights.