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| Carnivalization of Politics: The Presidency |
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**Introduction**

The American political system has become so theatrical, melodramatic, satirized and virtually indistinguishable from that of the entertainment industry. The general public has taken its love of ‘showbiz’ and a thirst to be amused to replace their need to be intellectually and socially motivated to political arenas. According to Emile Durkheim, one of the primary ways that personal identities, values, and beliefs are affirmed and its foundations maintained is though a society’s legal system. The transformation, or carnivalization, that has taken place has shown a decrease in the moral and ethical standing of many American citizens. This new era of political and social communication is apart of a mass “amusement society” that affects the core of the democratic system of electing officials and reporting. The amusement society has pierced every aspect of the political system especially the role of the America’s Commander in Chief. By understanding the carnivalization process and dissecting historical events, we can see how carnivalization has affected the American presidency.

**Social Transformations**

Before understanding the origins of the carnival we must first understand the social institutions that were implemented which led to the carnival takeover. According to scholars John Braudy (1997), Neal Gabler (2000), and Chris Rojek (2001) the three social transformations were 1) democratization, 2) Industrialization, and 3) secularization, the most impactful of the three being secularization. Democratization was the removal of the social institution that judged an individual by their family lineage. Industrialization allowed for the individual to be further removed from their mold giving them the chance to create wealth independently and become whoever they desired to become. These two institutions began to distort the traditional and symbolic ways of creating identities and accepting one’s new societal role.

Secularization had the most impact because it removed the importance of religion as a deciding factor for social identity and social institutions. The new political culture we are now in is based on moralistic views or an understanding of right and wrong, but using this knowledge as suggestions and not something the needs to be followed as many American religions suggest. The center of this new political culture is socially liberal, which embraces the secularized worldview where the political carnival and its acceptance were introduced. While Christianity has remained a vital force in many Americans lives, its influence has become more complex and often hypocritical to the current structure of American politics.

**Introduction of the “Carnival”**

The embrace of this secular worldview was the gateway to the political carnival. Originating from various places in Europe, the Carnival was a part of folk culture that suspended the usual codes of morality to valorize the profane and obscene (Bakhtin, 1968). Carnivals were normally times of sanctioned deviance, collective resistance, and role reversals took place. It was a ritualized cultural performance of deviance and mocking authority. During the carnival the elites within both church and state were often mocked and ridiculed. As Langman states “it was an alternative to and repudiation of the official culture of the nobility.” The carnival culture is now seen as the merger between mass mediated images and spectacles that have become an endless commodity fueling the amusement society.

The creation of the amusement society celebrates the vulgar, obscene and grotesque. Through this it has reversed the “civilizing process”. It has made private and personal matters a commodity of public entertainment. The mixture of politics and entertainment through the amusement society has turned defining and questioning morality into a group of societal definitions and judgments. The amusement society creates a “culture industry for an endless production of carnivalesque spectacles and titillations to inspire consumerism and diver consciousness from fundamental crisis and the precarious nature of our age to the *joissance* of fantasized realms” (Langman, p.504).

The modern carnival is a series of pseudo-events created to mimic or portray the theoretical political process but is just a form of entertainment (Boorstin, 1961). These pseudo-events, a term coined by Daniel Boorstin, are produced for both political and entertainment purposes, blurs the line between entertainment and news, and between true politicians and celebrities. The pseudo-events allow for people to not receive the actual political system but in an invented political institution that feeds there excitement and need for entertainment but does not feed them undefiled truth. Pseudo-events cause for individuals to unintentionally remove them from the knowledge of reality to a media enriched state of awareness that does not educate them on truth. Through these pseudo-events people get so far removed that they do not even realize that they have been introduced to this political carnival.

This then creates pseudo-politicians. These individuals portray the image of a capable and competent politician and presidential candidates but in reality they lack the customary qualifications needed for the position. Through these pseudo-events, Boorstin introduces the concept of the celebrity politicians, through his theory of a pseudo-politician.

**Celebrity Politicians**

During the 1960 presidential debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon the televised events provided absolutely no true insight into what the candidate true capacity to serve as the president, but simply showed how they would react on screen and broadcast their ability to perform. During these debates, Kennedy was seen as the winner, not based on his political theories or ideas for creating a better America, but his charisma, appearance and wit. Kennedy could be seen as one of the first pseudo-politicians or celebrity presidents.

While Kennedy can be seen as the first pseudo-politician, the Kennedy/Nixon debate was not the first use of media to inform the public on politics through an entertainment style. Former president Franklin Roosevelt used his ‘fireside chats’ in the 1930s to inform the American public on current political events and also ensure them of his calm and welcoming image. The chats were a way for him to connect with the general public. Outside of most common knowledge, Roosevelt’s administration includes some playwrights, poets and speechwriters. This shows that these chats were intellectually formed to connect with a people in a certain way to draw their attention while entertaining them.

The theory of political carnivalization is heavily founded and defended by the idea of celebrity politics. “Celebrities become politicians and politicians aspire to become celebrities as voters are regulated to the role of fans.” (Weiskel, 2005) Celebrity politicians are synonymous with pseudo-politicians. As we have seen through the Kennedy/Nixon debate example, the celebrity politician rose from the success of political personality defeating politics of substance. This created a society well tilled for the introduction and sustainment of the political carnival and a political realm not based on politics that will have any social significance, but politicians that have mastered their performance and ability to be unique and eye-catching. “The public has learned to take politics less seriously and stars more seriously. Politics is the perfect meeting ground, once a field that was restricted to the able trained; it is open to anyone with an opinion and a presence” (West and Orman, 2002).

A great way to showcase how politicians have been becoming celebritized all too quickly is through the way they campaign. Clinton was shown in tabloids like celebrities doing everyday activities as if it was something new. During his campaign he was featured in many entertainment magazines and even given an entire spread in *People* magazine where he was presented doing regular things like taking his daughter to school or telling the story of how he met his wife. This took the spotlight off of his politics and what he planned on doing and showcased his ability to ‘wow’ a crowd and capture one’s attention. Clinton was also features on various television shows in basic clothing doing personal interviews where he was showcased playing the saxophone engaging in non-political conversations that were used to gather support. This turned his supposed performers into actual fans which helped sustain his connectability with the American public and it worked in his favor during his sexual scandal.

**The Positives of Carnivialization**

There are however individuals who believe that the celeritization of politics may actual be improving our political system. Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) and Jeffrey Jones (2005) argue that the celebitization of politics is actually helping create a foundation of intellectual discourse about politics and social issues that would not have been previously discussed due to traditional political formats. They believe that the dramatization of politics is historical and has always been a way of connecting with constituents and gaining support.

van Zoonen believes that the while individuals are consuming these political platforms as media it is engaging them to speak on important issues and topics like morality and injustice as well as gain an emotional attachment to the candidate and their mission. He believes that the emotional attachment and dramatization should not be strictly in entertainment media, but needed to engage affective intelligence in the audience and escape traditional forms of political insight to connect to a larger audience.

Barack Obama is seen as one presidential candidate that found balance between celebrity and politician for the way he conducted his campaign and gained his supporter. van Zoonen would be able to use President Obama to defend his claim because he was portrayed in the media as being a natural born leader and focused on his history and glamourized his upbringing as a ‘disadvantages minority’ to promote skills of strong leadership and will power. This worked in his favor for multiple reasons, and in fact did strike the balance needed for a presidential candidate and their campaign. It caused various individuals to gain an emotional attachment to him and leading to unfaltering support.

The Clinton trial was seen by some scholars as the end of the puritanical world view and the last key factor in the secularization in the political carnival (Langman, 2002). The embrace of the secular worldview was the signing factor in not only forgiving Clinton but for some Americans granting him infamy as an amazing president and in some American cultures deemed as one of the best presidents American has seen although he was a expert liar.

**Gingrich’s Opinion on the Carnival**

The most recent example would be during the South Carolina Republican Primary debate where presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich was attacked by CNN news anchor John King with questions regarding his previous marriage. King began the debate with the first question seeking validation and explanation from Gingrich about supposedly asking for an open marriage and his infidelity with his former wife. Gingrich, rightfully outraged, took it upon himself to discuss the disrespect and pure exploitation of politics, especially political candidates, by the elite news media. This had an amazing impact on Gingrich’s polls and primary results. Prior to his debate Gingrich was down more than 10 in the pre-election surveys (Best, 2012) and after he was the winner of the South Carolina primary.

While there are many ways to analyze this event for the sake of this research I will focus strictly on his impact with the media and the American public. Gingrich’s address to the elite media and the public’s blatant disregard for the privacy of political candidates was a notable time a candidate publicly addressed the carnival or the irrelevancy of their personal lives and creation of pseudo-events. CBS News entitled the incident an “impressive debate performance” and credited the ‘performance’ to his win of the primary (Best, 2012), also stating that “Gingrich electrified debate audiences during the week with his confrontational exchanges and conservative rhetoric”.

People were won over by Gingrich’s attack, not because of Gingrich’s plan of action for the economy or his views on social concerns like abortion and healthcare. This is perfect example of the carnival at work. The public enjoyed the debate because it was not only entertaining but had a sense of drama and spectacle. Many tuned in to see if he would discuss his marital issues although they were private and irrelevant to his ability to sufficiently fulfill the duties of the presidency, but were met with Gingrich mounted on his soapbox shunning the very social media that is providing the public with their skewed information. His speech is prototypical of what van Zoonen was discussing in his work. The statements that Gingrich gave is what stimulated social conversation and caused people to think intellectually about what is occurring through their media. The problem arose because the question should not have been discussed or brought up to begin with.

**Implications of Carnivalization**

The carnival has made it socially acceptable to discuss and permit things that normally would have been socially outlawed such as sexual scandals, profanity, and vile gestures. This transformation of politics is what made a picture of current President Barack Obama smoking marijuana and the video of former president George W. Bush flipping the bird not only socially acceptable but glamorized. It has also made the infidelity of former presidents and personal sexual preferences of political leaders to become front page news. The carnival allows for the affair between Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe as well as Clinton and Lewinsky to be seen as favorable as opposed to a disgrace. Marilyn Monroe is currently one of the most loved social figures to young ladies in our culture today and Lewinsky’s lipstick club Monaco “Blaze’ lipstick, “Sugar’ gloss, and “Bare” lipliner to become sold out within hours of her interview with Barbara Walters. Politics is becoming a mockery mockery, a pure disregard for the truth and a rebirth of Hollywood’s tinsel town masked as a democracy.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the history of American politics there has been various social changes that have allowed for the carnival to be introduced and become sustained in American culture. The pure mockery and satirization of its political systems and exposure of private information of political actor’s lives have also become typical discourse in this society. The carnival alone has made it difficult to run a democracy that is no longer based on social structures and political institutions but popularity, glitz, glamour, and drama. While it is a hard pill to swallow, the system needs a radical change in order to have a society that is information based and not entertainment run. To continue this research one would have to further analyze other political events and processes and see note the ways that they have been changed. As a culture we must regain our sense of truth and seriousness, or we will allow the carnival to consume the very country that we adore.

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