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The Phantom Public (International Organizations Series)



Synopsis

In an era disgusted with politicians and the various instruments of "direct democracy," Walter Lippmann's *The Phantom Public* remains as relevant as ever. It reveals Lippmann at a time when he was most critical of the ills of American democracy. Antipopulist in sentiment, this volume defends elitism as a serious and distinctive intellectual option, one with considerable precursors in the American past. Lippmann's demythologized view of the American system of government resonates today. *The Phantom Public* discusses the "disenchanted man" who has become disillusioned not only with democracy, but also with reform. According to Lippmann, the average voter is incapable of governance; what is called the public is merely a "phantom." In terms of policy-making, the distinction should not be experts versus amateurs, but insiders versus outsiders. Lippmann challenges the core assumption of Progressive politics as well as any theory that pretends to leave political decision making in the hands of the people as a whole. In his biography *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, Ronald Steel praised *The Phantom Public* as "one of Lippmann's most powerfully argued and revealing books. In it he came fully to terms with the inadequacy of traditional democratic theory." This volume is part of a continuing series on the major works of Walter Lippmann. As more and more Americans are inclined to become apathetic to the political system, this classic will be essential reading for students, teachers, and researchers of political science and history.

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Customer Reviews

Very interesting read. Great insight and observations to consider when making political judgments. Lippman committed his life to political observer. Many questions in the book allow the reader to formulate their own opinion.

The book arrived on time and in excellent condition. This is one of series of reprints of books long out of print. I am grateful for that.

Unfortunately this text is not nearly as popular as Lippmann's precursor work "Public Opinion". It's a classic of the elite nihilistic attitude towards the masses, astoundingly pessimistic, Lippmann puts into language suited for the very common person a total denunciation of that person's abilities. His logic is not very strong though on many occasions, such as when he goes on about how we are expected to make decisions about such and such one day and such other trivial matter the next... he oversimplifies to draw his sought after conclusions. One should read this though to get a good grasp of how the elite members of government and media learned to treat the public.

Lippmann is usually taken to be a pessimist about democracy. Those who see him this way (and perhaps that would include Lippman himself) fail to consider that Lippmann's diagnosis of the failed citizen and his convincing argument that the citizen simply lacks the inclination and capacity for genuine democratic participation is most convincing only if people consider big, centralized and increasingly intrusive government as an inevitability. It isn't. Further, those who consider it an inevitability generally argue that it is so because it is a necessity. Society, they argue, has become so complex and intertwined and thus delicate that decision making must by necessity be in the hands of those who can recognize and handle its complexity. In other words, experts. This is the view that justifies dictatorships of the proletariat, a talented tenth and bureaucracy. Further, starting from the pretense that people are bad decision makers, those who actually govern the society need to be isolated from the democratic process. If society is to be managed, it must be managed without having to answer to all the fools clamouring for the irrational through their legislative

representatives. The idea things are so complex that ordinary men can't really govern reminds me of the Hobbesian notion that people are inherently corrupt and driven to abuse power for their own unseemly purposes and thus we need to concentrate power in the hands of a monarch. In other words: all people are corrupt, so let's give total power to a person. The real folly is not that the ordinary citizen is too ill informed to manage society; the real folly is that people are capable of being well informed enough to manage much more than their own lives. Just as the average citizen can't really vote rationally on complex matters involving untold numbers of people and circumstances, so the planner cannot really understand, much less actually know, all of the information needed for a truly informed decision. In other words, the more complex a society becomes, the more simple and limited its government must become. People are not rendered incapable of governing; they just need to have their input limited to their immediate set of circumstances. Here, their decisions won't always yield the results anticipated, but they are certainly in a better position to know why. Thus, the idea that Lippmann's view of the democratic citizen to effectively manage the United States is depressing only if you think that it can't manage itself. It can. It's called a free market. As for the people's voice in government, they remain perfectly capable of directing state and local governments towards desirable ends. What Lippmann really proves is that the anti-Federalists were right. Local government governs best. "Average" people can govern the children's schools, the local police - but, the real point evaded by both Lippmann and his critics is that people can govern their own lives quite well and experts know infinitely less about the consequences of policy on an individual's life than the individual does. In other words, Lippmann's critics suffer the same fatal conceits they accuse Lippmann of having: an elitist presumption of knowing what's best for people they don't even know and a refusal to entertain letting people run their own lives for fear that the results would actually be good and thus give visible evidence of the superiority of free markets and human liberty and forever condemn statism to the ashheap of history.

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