

Walter Lippmann

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PUBLIC**

With a new introduction by  
Wilfred M. McClay

## The Phantom Public

*Walter Lippmann (Editor)*

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# The Phantom Public

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## **The Phantom Public** Walter Lippmann (Editor)

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.

## **The Phantom Public Details**

Date : Published January 30th 1993 by Routledge (first published 1927)

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## From Reader Review The Phantom Public for online ebook

### **Heather Bielecki says**

Somewhat pessimistic about democracy without really any concrete solutions for alternatives except to leave it to the 'insiders'. However, it is classic poli sci literature.

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### **Mg says**

Référence indispensable pour les réflexions sur la notion de "public"; à lire en dialogue avec Dewey, Le public et ses problèmes.

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### **Margie says**

I learned about the bleak outlook with which Progressives view The People. The philosophies made me sick to my stomach because they are elitist and imply that The People don't have rights because they're too stupid to operate as a group. I found it interesting that in the movie "13 Days" that the President leaked disinformation to Lippmann because he knew Lippmann would blab it to the Russians. I thought Communism was dead in this country, but I have been brought back to the sickening reality that not only is it alive and shoving it's way into the mainstream, but that our corrupt Congress is rife with it fueled by the writings of Alinsky, Lippmann and other subversives.

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### **Martha says**

I would like this in the Kindle Edition, when it comes available.

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### **Manda Lea says**

Oldie, but a goodie.

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### **Peter says**

Walter Lippmann argues that members of the public are but "spectators of action," (93) not the omnicompetent, sovereign beings assumed in democratic theory; nor is it possible for them to be. This, Lippmann argues, is a false ideal. (28) There are simply too many things to know and too little time to come to know them for anyone — average citizen, empowered elite — to become expert in everything. (28, among others) The make-up of the public varies from issue to issue; a person might be an expert/participant on one issue, and a member of the public on another. (100) He dismantles various approaches that might improve

the situation — science (eugenics), morals (ethics), education, populism, socialism. (25-28) The public assumed in theories of democratic governance is “a phantom.” (67) Lacking the necessary knowledge or expertise, they cannot intervene based on the merits of cases. They must judge externally, based on symbols and signs, and can act only by throwing their support behind one of the interests involved. (93) Lippmann relies on a construct and series of assumptions about the differences between “insiders” and “outsiders”, and firmly believes that only insiders are positioned to act. (140)

For the source of the “false ideal”, Lippmann points to the attempt to “ascribe organic unity and purpose to society.” (145-146)

The author provides a crystalline synopsis of his views on 134-135 and restates them on 162 and 187.

The public is tremendously limited in its abilities, energies, capacities, and capabilities. The public, unable to understand the merits of each and every case, must rely on readily intelligible signs and symbols to direct their alignments. (64-65) “Since it acts by aligning itself, it personalizes whatever it considers, and is interested only when events have been melodramatized as a conflict. The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and will leave before the last curtain, having stayed just long enough perhaps to decide who is the hero and who the villain of the piece.” (55) The public only becomes involved in moments of crisis, and the purpose of its involvement is “to help allay the crisis.” (56) The most that public opinion can do is to come to the assistance of someone challenging arbitrary power. (60) “When power, however absolute and unaccountable, reigns without provoking a crisis, public opinion does not challenge it.” (60) “It is the function of public opinion to check the use of force in a crisis, so that men, driven to make terms, may live and let live.” (64) In the democratic process, citizens align themselves with or against proposals. They do not direct continuously political affairs; instead, they occasionally mobilize in majorities to support or oppose the people who actually govern. (50-52)

The public need address itself to only two questions, when a problem warranting its involvement emerges: 1) Is the rule [thing] defective? 2) How do I figure out who can fix it, thereby identifying to whom to give my support? (98) To determine whether a rule is defective, Lippmann proposes two tests: assent and conformity. Assent refers to an obvious lack of agreement among interested parties. Conformity follows logically — if an interested party feels it has not assented to a rule, its followers are likely not to conform to the rule. Evidence of nonconformity can therefore be indicative of a need for public involvement. (105-110) To determine which party to support, the public can apply the test of inquiry: the disputant willing to submit to a process of inquiry is likely in the right and deserves support. (122-125) In formulating new rules, Lippmann proposes another three tests: 1) does it provide for its own clarification? Amendment by consent? Due notice that amendment will be proposed? (128)

He concludes by saying that he sets “no great store on what can be done by public opinion and the action of the masses.” (189) For anyone skimming, this comment and several others throughout the text make Lippmann easier to dismiss as elite/conservative/condescending. The force of the ideas he develops make him not so easily dismissed.

### Interesting Tidbits

Lippmann sees little real difference between competing political groups. (116-117) If there were actual, sharp differences, election loss might mean actual rebellion. (116-117)

“Nor does the public rouse itself normally at the existence of evil. It is aroused at evil made manifest by the interruption of a habitual process of life.” (57)

“When the public attempts to deal with the substance it merely becomes the dupe or unconscious ally of a special interest.” (96)

“...he would wish for a world in which he could fight perfectly, with enemies fleet enough to extend him and not too fleet to elude him. All men desire their own perfect adjustment, but they desire it, being finite men, on their own terms.” (161) [Clearly related to the idea of mastery, for example in the workplace; people find work satisfying when it is sufficiently challenging, but not impossible. See Daniel Pink, among others]

### Historiography

This work forms part of the material that John Dewey responded to in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). (xviii)

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### Michael says

I came to read this some years ago after reading Noam Chomsky reference the book numerous times. This is a more entertaining read than *Public Opinion*, both more clearly cynical and also written in a much more chummy style. It's at times thought provoking.

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### Eric Gulliver says

I believe this quote from the text sums up the general framework:

“The fundamental difference which matters is that between insiders and outsiders. Their relations to a problem are radically different. Only the insiders can make decisions, not because he is inherently a better man but because he is so placed that he can understand and can act. The outsider is necessarily ignorant, usually irrelevant and often meddlesome, because he is trying to navigate the ship from dry land. – In short, like the democratic theorists, they miss the essence of the matter, which is, that competence exists only in relation to function; that men are not good, but good for something.; that men cannot be educated, but only educated for something” P.140.

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### Kevinch417 says

Super pessimistic about the average person. I loved every word of it.

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### Anittah says

I first read Walter "Cranky Pants" Lippmann my freshman year in college ("Drift and Mastery"); my nocturnal adolescent self particularly cherished his line about how societal norms force intelligent people to conform to sheep-scripts in order to maintain the respect of their peers -- sweet sweet nectar to the brain of someone from a Midwestern nerd-school newly adrift on the Gothic campus of an upper-crusty liberal arts college.

In "The Phantom Public", our favorite grouch directs his ire towards, basically, everyone, stating that our bozo citizenry is too dim-witted to be entrusted with voting, that the notion of an educated populace is hogwash, and that any hope of a political process approaching anything other than dog-pooh is at best the dreaming of someone on shrooms and at worst the fast track towards a society knocking on the doors of hell.

(These are my words of course (were shrooms around in Lippman's day?) Anyway that's the gist.)

Comforting: there's always someone who is certain that the current moment in society is the worst it has ever been.

Comforting: there's always someone who feels that the knowledge base of Median Joe is substandard.

Not comforting: my lesser, more shadow-y side found myself agreeing in many ways with El Curmudgeon.

Skimworthy at the very least for anyone who often dreams of architecting a different kind of society.

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### **Brian says**

I would advise people to read this, and read it slowly. Find out about the man, who he worked with and what he did in the early 1900's. I felt totally annoyed when I finished this book and I'm not sure I know why.

I read a lot but this book made me feel uneasy because I wasn't sure I was getting the intended message and for that I feel annoyed. At times his prose was brilliant, I agreed and yet I wasn't sure I was agreeing with what I would think was true, like he was a politician running for office and making his position sound good to get elected but it really was terrible for almost everyone.

I may have to get ambitious and reread it. Being linked with President Wilson as Lippman was draws immediate scorn. The ideas that came out of this era in America are dangerous to the America values we've had since the founding. However, I think it's wise to read a view point other than your own.

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