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Introduction

Depicting Democracy

Anybody who wants to understand what the British think about their democracy – that is the elections, parties, leaders and legislatures that give it shape – as well as why they think it, should take fiction seriously.¹ This is because plays, novels and films, along with television dramas and comedies, have long articulated Britons' hopes and (more often and increasingly) fears about the exercise of political power. Looked at in the right way, these can tell us much about Britain's political culture. Building on the insight that elections are but 'the final ceremony of a long process', *A State of Play* argues that culture is an integral part of the formal political process.² From Benjamin Disraeli's 'One Nation' to *House of Cards*' 'You might very well think that; I couldn't possibly comment' and *The Thick of It*'s 'omnishambles', concepts, characters and phrases originating in fiction have not only fashioned Westminster politicians' discourse but also, and more insidiously, helped mould how those millions beyond the Commons Chamber regard – accurately or not – the reality of democracy.

Like all prologues, this introduction sets the scene for what is to come. It outlines the key ideas and themes contained in *A State of Play* while explaining why its subject – the fictional representation of British politics since the end of the nineteenth century – is important and sketches out how it will be explored. As the book stresses the ubiquity and significance of political themes in what might superficially appear the most unlikely of works, to establish this theme, its introductory chapter begins with an analysis of one of the lesser-regarded protagonists of British political fiction.

Learning from Lester

Lester the cockerel wanted to be leader of Big Barn Farm. The rooster believed only he could run the farm efficiently, by waking the animals very early and subjecting them to harsh discipline throughout the day. When they heard of

Lester's intentions, the four young members of the Farmyard Bunch – who enjoyed their lie-ins and mucking about – determined to find an adult to stand against him. After numerous refusals, Petal the piglet asked her mother, Mrs. Snaffles; thinking herself unworthy of leadership she reluctantly agreed, if only to stop Lester bossing everybody about. Now forced to compete for votes, Lester cynically mobilized support by organizing a football match to give the animals some fun – although fun was the last thing they'd get if he became leader. Mrs. Snaffles arranged a sports day in response. Just as they were about to vote, however, the returning Farmer dispersed the animals, restoring the natural order.

The above is a description of 'Lester the Leader', an episode of the series *Big Barn Farm*, written by Peter Cocks, which was first aired in 2008 on CBeebies, a channel intended for pre-school children. A programme meant for those who have only just begun to string together coherent sentences is not the first place many might start a book such as this. Certainly, when listing their favourite political fictions, journalists or bloggers have yet to refer to *Big Barn Farm*. In contrast, the sitcom *Yes, Minister* (BBC, 1980–8) or its more recent counterpart *The Thick of It* (BBC, 2005–12) regularly top such lists. Further down the running order often appear the melodramatic TV series *House of Cards* (BBC, 1990–5), based on the novels of Michael Dobbs; the sitcom *The New Statesman* (ITV, 1987–92); and *A Very British Coup*, the 1982 conspiracy thriller written by Chris Mullin, an adaptation of which was broadcast on Channel 4 in 1988. Yet, despite its different setting and audience, 'Lester the Leader' evoked similar ideas about politics to those found in these better-known fictions as well as earlier, long-forgotten works that never make it on to lists.

The most obvious echo is that Lester is male – just like Jim Hacker (*Yes, Minister*), Francis Urquhart (*House of Cards*), Malcolm Tucker (*The Thick of It*), Alan B'Stard (*The New Statesman*) and the rest. Of course, men have long dominated Britain's real politics: it wasn't until 1997 that women formed more than ten per cent of the House of Commons. Descriptively, then, politics has always been a male domain, so it is not surprising that fictional characters seeking or holding power are usually shown as men.³ Lester, however, is not just any kind of male. That he is literally a cock was an accident of the farmyard setting, but his creator says Lester 'stands for cocky, puffed-up male values, and his regime would be hierarchical and militaristic'.⁴ In that regard, Lester shares characteristics with those arrogant MPs with whom Agatha Christie populated many of her murder mysteries. In fact, the pompous politician was a cliché well before Christie put pen to paper, and he remains a stand-by character in comedies of various sorts.

Lester's craving for power is not motivated by his desire to satisfy the wants of the animals. Its object is to bring *him* satisfaction, as being leader will prove how important he already thinks he is. In this regard, *Big Barn Farm*'s cockerel is as one with the vast majority of fiction's self-seeking male politicians. One such character was Hamer Shawcross, anti-hero of Howard Spring's novel *Fame is the Spur* (1940), which was turned into a movie in 1947 and a 1982 BBC TV series. Shawcross represents himself, not the people: if becoming an MP and Cabinet minister brings him glory, they do not benefit.

Mrs. Snaffles is also a recognizable type: the honest outsider reluctantly drawn into politics so as to truly represent the people's interests. In the 1940s men normally played these self-sacrificing figures, such as comedian George Formby in *He Snoops to Conquer* (1944) or everyman actor Jack Warner in *Vote for Huggett* (1948). Their humble social position helped establish these working-class movie characters' renegade status within a party system depicted as a scam run by and for its privileged participants. By the start of the twenty-first century, such figures were more often women, with politics represented as a specifically male racket. These characters, like Mrs. Snaffles, promised to change politics for the better by investing it with supposedly feminine virtues grounded in their experience as homemakers. This is certainly what television's *The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard* (BBC, 2006) did when she became Prime Minister at the head of her all-woman Purple Alliance. Cocks' description of Snaffles as 'female, lateral and democratic' could easily have been applied to Ros Pritchard.⁵

Big Barn Farm is, moreover, typical in presenting the electoral process as corrupt. If the narrator explains that an election 'is the thing where everyone says who they would like most to be the leader', the contest depicted is one in which the animals are appealed to on the basis of how much fun each candidate can provide. Of course, had Lester talked about his policy towards the European Union, most pre-schoolers would have been a little confused. Even so, the election evokes the infamously corrupt Eatanswill by-election described by Charles Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers* as far back as 1837 – one in which beer and money are traded for votes. 'Lester the Leader' is also part of a long-standing tradition of showing how easily voters are swayed by trinkets or stunts, one that not only includes Dickens but also A. J. Cronin's novel *The Stars Look Down* (1935) and the movie *Left, Right and Centre* (1959). Finally, 'Lester the Leader' ends in a manner reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1944): Cocks admits he had deliberately included a 'totalitarian subtext'. The Farmer's intervention also suggests that there are those whose power is greater than that exercised by the people's own representatives.⁶ In so doing, it makes a point similar to that outlined many times in what

were, by the early twenty-first century, ubiquitous political conspiracy thrillers, one of the first of which was *A Very British Coup*.

'Lester the Leader' is just one instance in which children have been presented with dramatizations of politics. During the second term of Tony Blair's government the BBC broadcast the comedy series *My Dad's the Prime Minister* (2003–4), first on CBBC, its digital channel for older children, and then on BBC One at a time popular with 'family' audiences. The series, co-written by Ian Hislop, one of Britain's leading satirists, presented a lightly fictionalized version of Blair's premiership from the perspective of an eleven-year-old boy. Thus, the Prime Ministerial father is obsessed by how he is regarded in the media and even hosts a reception that evokes Blair's attempt to associate New Labour with 'Cool Britannia'. The Prime Minister is, however – according to Nick Newman, who wrote the series with Hislop – 'merely genially devious'.⁷ In contrast, while J. K. Rowling's Ministry of Magic in her *Harry Potter* novels (1997–2007) was initially just incompetent, as she reacted to the politics of the War on Terror, it became increasingly authoritarian.⁸

A 2005 episode of the family-orientated BBC science fiction series *Doctor Who* also critically reflected on the reasons given by the British government for helping the United States invade Iraq two years previously. In it, the evil Slitheen claimed to threaten Earth with what transpired to be non-existent 'massive weapons of destruction' that could be deployed in 45 seconds. This parodied Blair's claim that Saddam Hussein held 'weapons of mass destruction' that would reach their target in 45 minutes. This was only one of a number of times over the decades in which writers for the series used it to comment on political issues. In the 1970s, the Doctor expressed views supportive of Britain's entry into the European Economic Community and in favour of the miners during their dispute with the government of Edward Heath, as well as against the tax regime of the 1974–9 Labour government which followed.⁹ During her 1980s ascendancy, the series also took Margaret Thatcher to task, openly satirizing the Prime Minister and her policies.¹⁰

This was no recent phenomenon. In 1930 Richmal Crompton's infamous William Brown of her *Just William* series was elected Conservative Prime Minister by children in his village after beating a Liberal – of whose party one of William's more knowledgeable friends said 'they want to make things better by alterin' them jus' a bit, but not so's anyoned'd notice' – a Socialist – 'they want to make things better by taking everyone's money off 'em' – and a Communist – 'they want to make things better by killin' everyone but themselves'. In contrast, Conservatives, it was claimed, 'want to make things better by keepin' 'em just

like what they are now.' Moreover, as William explained after his victory, it was now the job of his beaten foes to oppose all his proposals. As he told them: 'You're the other side, so you oughter try 'n' stop me doin' it even if you want it. They do in pol'tics. You've gotter be against me. It's one of the rules.' If this seemed to make each party equally if differently ridiculous, of the Liberal, Crompton wrote: 'There were certainly the makings of a politician in Douglas. He didn't care what he promised.'¹¹

We cannot quantify the impact of such works on their young audiences. Even so, a writer who in 1989 had the Doctor deliver a speech in favour of unilateralism believed that 'sadly, nobody really noticed or cared'.¹² How many *Doctor Who* viewers possessed strong views about one of the most controversial issues of the 1980s we will never know. But it would have been remarkable had one scene in a single episode of the series made any advocate of nuclear weapons change their minds. As we shall see, fiction – just like politics – rarely has that kind of instantaneous, transformative effect: but that does not mean it has no impact.

Certainly, the political references underpinning 'Lester the Leader' would have bypassed pre-school viewers, although possibly not all of their bleary-eyed parents or carers who, as I did, stumbled across the episode one early morning while getting ready for work. What is indisputable, however, is that the episode was based on a coherent view of democracy: as Peter Cocks says, Lester 'shouts louder than anyone else ... which accounts for the rise of many political leaders'. This reflected a broad consensus, at least as conceived by those who fictionalized politics. In painting such a picture some writers have had explicit agendas, but Cocks was typical of those many who less consciously evoked a particularly negative view. As he put it, 'while I never really make any "issue based" work the issues always seem to creep out, probably absorbed from the ether'.¹³

If rendered in anthropomorphic form and with entertainment to the fore, in telling his story Cocks, then, implicitly endorsed certain ideas.¹⁴ 'Lester the Leader' was as a consequence just one more instance of a writer encouraging an audience to think as they do and so one more piece in the puzzle that helps explain why so many today do not much care for aspects of representative democracy.

Given that, it is time to focus on 'real', adult and human politics.

The way we think now

Since it was first broadcast, 'Lester the Leader' has been repeated many times. The episode was shown on thirteen occasions in 2009, the year the *Daily*

Telegraph published evidence of the scale on which MPs were abusing the parliamentary expenses system. With headlines screaming of how the representatives of the people had tax-payers subsidize their purchases of duck houses, trouser presses and the rest, the *Telegraph* set off a bout of mass outrage. John Wick, who leaked the information, claimed he did it because Parliament was 'rotten to the core'; a survey conducted in the aftermath of the expenses scandal suggested the majority of Britons agreed.¹⁵ Nearly two-thirds believed that 'the giving and taking of bribes, and the abuse of positions of power for personal gain' was 'widespread' among national politicians.¹⁶ Sir Thomas Legg's subsequent investigation did not exactly vindicate these views. Finding that somewhat more than half of MPs had over-claimed on average £3,300, Legg hardly established that, as a group, they were 'rotten to the core'. It was nonetheless no badge of honour that getting on for ten Parliamentarians were eventually convicted of fraud.¹⁷

During this time MPs were horrified by what some considered their unfair depiction in the media. The Labour backbencher Chris Mullin – he of *A Very British Coup* – noted in his diary that the *Telegraph* had declared 'open season ... on us wretched, despised servants of the people', later commenting that those claiming to be disillusioned with politicians 'are mostly the same people who fail to put out their waste bins on the appointed day, allow their dogs to foul the pavement, [and] take no interest in their children's education'.¹⁸ It was, ironically, because they feared antagonizing an already hostile public that MPs had balked at awarding themselves the kind of salaries many observers believed matched their responsibilities. To take a random example, quite a few of the journalists interrogating MPs about their expenses earned at least twice as much as a backbench MP, and without being subject to the same scrutiny, demands and insecurity.¹⁹ MPs had looked on their allowances as a clandestine means of compensating themselves for working in many cases over seventy hours a week in a career that, as the journalist Dominic Lawson put it, 'is desperately uncertain ... and relying on the public's whim, without guarantee of a job for more than five years'.²⁰ It was, the Speaker of the House of Commons argued, a 'cruel paradox that at a time when MPs have never worked harder, their standing has rarely been lower'.²¹

Reactions to the *Telegraph's* revelations illustrated the depth of popular hostility toward politicians. It also confirmed how far such feelings were the product of perception rather than personal experience or knowledge. While thinking political corruption 'widespread', just three per cent of Britons said they had been asked to pay a bribe.²² Many voters were in any case ignorant about the most basic ways in which representative politics worked: in 2009

sixty-two per cent confessed they knew not very much or nothing at all about Parliament while forty-nine per cent felt the same about the work of an MP.²³ And yet, somehow, most were confident that Westminster was close to a moral cesspit. This raises an obvious question: how do Britons come to believe what they think they know about politics? To answer that, we must go back to *Big Barn Farm* and its more illustrious counterparts.

Why fiction?

The ability of the media to influence how people view politics worried politicians well before 2009. Facing severe criticism from certain newspapers, in 1931 Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin, borrowing a phrase from his cousin Rudyard Kipling, accused press barons of enjoying the 'prerogative of the harlot of the ages', given they exerted power without responsibility.²⁴ Preparing to stand down as Prime Minister nearly eighty years later, Tony Blair noted how the media ignored everyday parliamentary activity but was instead obsessed by the possibility of 'scandal' and 'conspiracy' and like a 'feral beast' set about 'tearing people and reputations to bits'.²⁵ Blair might be suspected of special pleading, but many academics believe that how it is reported makes a significant contribution to the low standing of representative politics.²⁶

The public is certainly conscious of the role played by the news media. When asked in 2004 what influenced their opinions about politics, the top two sources people mentioned were television news (eighty-two per cent) and newspapers and magazines (sixty-three per cent).²⁷ So far as we can tell, nobody mentioned even one work of fiction. If its power is more subtle and harder to quantify than that of newspaper or television news, fiction does, however, play a role in shaping views of politics. Qualitative research suggests fiction can inform how people think about themselves politically and influences how they understand political issues.²⁸ As fewer people read newspapers or watch television news it is likely fiction will become an even more important source of information about politics. Most students of British politics nevertheless continue to favour focusing on official forms and processes: for them, these are what really matter in a democracy. But as a result they only have a one-sided and superficial view of the subject, such that, as one expert has conceded, political scientists do not yet know 'what politics *means* to citizens'.²⁹

In contrast, fiction is taken more seriously in the United States. As the political theorist Catherine Zuckert argued, fiction enables researchers to reach

‘the attitudes, emotions, and opinions that shape and are shaped by people’s circumstances.’³⁰ By the end of the twentieth century, many accepted that ideas about reality are strongly influenced – if not completely constructed – by storytelling.³¹ This notion was associated with post-modern theorists, such as Jean-François Lyotard, who believed narration to be ‘the quintessential form of customary knowledge’.³² It was, however, by no means confined to such esoteric figures. Thus, according to the sociologist Margaret Somers, all claims to knowledge

are transmitted *via* some kind of cultural schema; they are culturally embedded – that is, mediated through symbolic systems and practices, such as metaphors, ritualized codes, stories, analogies, or homologues.³³

Within this process, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously claimed: ‘The real is as imagined as the imaginary.’³⁴ This meant that even the most elemental of political concepts – for example, the nation – could only exist once, as Benedict Anderson put it, it had been ‘imagined’ by readers of newspapers – and novels.³⁵ The political communications theorist Murray Edelman even went so far as to claim:

art creates realities and worlds. People perceive and conceive in the light of narratives, pictures, and images. That is why art is central to politics, just as it is central to social relationships and to beliefs about nature. There cannot be any representation that reproduces another entity, scene, or conception, but only constructions that may purport to reproduce reality while simplifying, elaborating, accenting, or otherwise constructing actualities and fantasies.

This process of ‘construction’ was most evident in politics, Edelman argued, because that was something of which, apart from voting, few people had direct and personal experience.³⁶ As a consequence, analysts in the United States commonly refer to the influence of fiction on real politics, notably its effect on the ‘cult of the Presidency’.³⁷

A very short history of British democracy

Before analyzing the effect of fictions about politics in more detail, it is important to assess the context within which they were produced: British representative democracy, as embodied by Westminster. It is the nature of this parliamentary system, one that necessarily involves people voting for others who they have

to trust to represent them, upon which fiction has commented. To be sure, there is a lot to criticize in a process that promises to reflect the people's voice, as even with the best of intentions, it is a promise can never be fully met. At the 2010 general election there were forty-six million electors, each of whom articulated conflicting and inconsistent wishes: how can any political system represent them?³⁸ Yet the means by which the British arrived at what they call democracy have only enhanced its inherently problematic character, such that while Parliament is hardly 'rotten to the core,' as a body meant to represent the people, it has a way to go.

The period covered by *A State of Play* saw considerable political change. At the end of the nineteenth century the Conservative and Liberal parties stood at the fulcrum of power but with only mostly better-off men able to vote. By the middle decades of the twentieth century both main parties – Labour having replaced the Liberals – had apparently dug deep roots within an electorate consisting of all adults. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, many talked of a crisis of democracy, one in which an increasing number were alienated from the institutional means supposed to give their voice expression.

Underlying these shifts was a basic continuity that ensured the gap between the promise of democracy and its disappointing reality remained unbridged.³⁹ As the historian Edmund Morgan notably claimed, while central to the appeal of democracy, 'popular sovereignty' was a myth elites from the seventeenth century onwards mobilized to beguile those below them so as to entrench their own power.⁴⁰ Other historians – from High Tories to radical post-modernists – argue that the staged extension of the franchise from 1832 to 1968 took place on terms set by a Westminster cabal.⁴¹ With many of its leaders mistrusting the people's voice, even the Labour party quickly embraced the established Westminster way of doing politics.⁴² Given this, according to one interwar constitutional expert, if the political parties 'provided efficient channels of communication between head-quarters and the country ... the traffic ... has been chiefly from the centre to the circumference.' Yet, echoing the dominant contemporary view, the concentration of power in Westminster was not, the author believed, detrimental to the 'real interests of the people.' It meant there was clarity in the policies put to the country so government would be better able to implement them. In other words, there could either be an accurate representation of opinion in Parliament or effective government. This was why it was acceptable that the first-past-the-post system, which elected MPs, reflected the people's wishes only 'broadly and approximately' because it did so without ambiguity, allowing the governors to govern.⁴³

As a result, according to the historian Kevin Jefferys, Britain never had anything more than an ‘anaemic’ political culture.⁴⁴ The party leaderships believed that holding an election every five years was enough democracy. Thus, even at their most popular in the early 1950s, well over ninety per cent of the population did not belong to a political party.⁴⁵ Of those that did, few could influence their leaders – nor, according to the leading academic expert of the day, were they meant to.⁴⁶ If democracy marked a revolution in the way power was exercised it was a largely passive one, with, to all intents and purposes, ‘politics’ meaning (to paraphrase Joseph Schumpeter’s maxim) the rule of the Westminster party politician rather than the people themselves.⁴⁷

If this led to a situation in which many Britons looked upon their political system as distant and alien, it was only during the Second World War that an unprecedented number turned to those who articulated explicitly anti-party sentiments. This inchoate movement even briefly threatened Winston Churchill’s position as Prime Minister and led Conservative MPs to fear the people had ceased to have faith in Parliament – if, at least one speculated, they had *ever* believed in it.⁴⁸ This antipathy appeared to diminish after 1945, but it did not disappear. People kept voting, but that said much about how Labour and the Conservatives had attached themselves, leech-like, to existing class loyalties that usually trumped scepticism. The post-war blurring of social identities, however, saw these ties weaken and as a result Britons voted less and were more weakly attached to and trusting of the parties for whom they did vote.⁴⁹

Consequently, when the *Daily Telegraph* published its revelations about MPs and their expenses, it merely confirmed long-standing uncertainties about the nature of democracy.⁵⁰ This situation did not owe everything to social change, although that did make people less tolerant of democracy’s flaws. Nor was it the result of an informed appreciation on the people’s part of the flawed manner in which politics was organized, for many remained largely ignorant of that. At least some of the origins of the present crisis of politics can, however, be traced to how people imagined their politics to be, and in that process fiction played an important part. It is, then, time to be more specific about the nature of that role.

Audiences and lessons

A writer without an audience is like a politician without votes: possibly interesting but definitely irrelevant. While not all pursued mass popularity – and

some deliberately appealed to minority audiences – Anthony Trollope, one of the nineteenth century's most successful political novelists, was in danger of stating the obvious when he announced that 'The writer of stories must please, or he will be nothing.'⁵¹ Trollope's was a simple but crucial point: at some level all writers take account of what they – and their collaborators, including publishers, editors, producers and even those who perform their words – presume audiences want. As T. S. Eliot, who wrote *The Elder Statesman* (1959) among other politically themed works, pointed out, playwrights can only dramatize subjects that already have some meaning for audiences.⁵² Indeed, David Edgar – author of more than his share of political dramas – asserted that as a consequence most plays are the 'possession not of the writer but of the audience.'⁵³ But as others have pointed out, that influence goes both ways. Historians Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards suggest the relationship between filmmaker and audience is a 'two-way process operating in areas of shared experience and shared perception.'⁵⁴ In reality, according to Edelman, the interplay between writer and audience means that fictions are 'part of the social milieu from which political movements also emerge', so there is 'no simple causal connection' between the two.⁵⁵

Given the imperative for writers to make a connection with audiences, while fiction tells us something about the person who produced it, it also says much about the context in which he or she laboured, and so of wider opinion. What can be told about the latter becomes more definite if a number of texts share consistent patterns, either over time and by the same writer or within a particular period and written by different hands. In fact, many writers operate within genres, that is groups of works that repeat the same conventions, characters, plots, and even scenes because they were known to be popular with audiences, leading the genre theorist Thomas Schatz to describe them as 'a form of *collective* cultural expression.'⁵⁶

While trying to please audiences Trollope also noted that a writer 'must teach whether he wish to teach or no.'⁵⁷ Trollope was one of a generation of novelists that students of the period claim created empathy for Britain's governors among those they ruled. In this way the likes of Trollope 'educated' their readers, many of whom belonged to those relatively well-placed classes enfranchised thanks to the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, encouraging their incorporation within the assumptions of a pre-democratic political system.⁵⁸ The near quadrupling of the electorate between 1918 and 1928 to include all men and women meant that while voters became overwhelmingly working-class and predominantly female, few were inclined to read Trollope. This new electorate supplied the bulk of

the audience for more popular literary forms like the detective novel and were especially drawn to the cinema, and later television. As a consequence, politics was often subsequently portrayed in ways of which Trollope would not have approved.

For much of the period covered by *A State of Play*, the kind of lessons a writer might teach was limited thanks to official and informal censorship. Due to the private way in which they were consumed and also their more middle-class audience, novels were most able to express challenging political ideas. Thus while Disraeli's novel *Coningsby* (1844) was published without difficulty, its stage version was initially prohibited.⁵⁹ So long as they avoided obscenity and did not defame individuals, novelists were generally at liberty to write what they wished.⁶⁰ Plays operated under a more restrictive form of supervision, one managed until 1968 by the Lord Chamberlain's Office, which could ban those considered immoral or a threat to public peace. By the start of the twentieth century morality rather than politics exercised censors and they even allowed the performance of interwar dramas that made an overtly Communist case. This was, however, not due to the Lord Chamberlain's liberality, but because theatre audiences by then contained few workers, and so censors doubted they would have any harmful impact.⁶¹

Cinema was, in contrast, popular with women, the young and workers in general, groups those in authority believed were vulnerable to dangerous appeals.⁶² This meant that the film industry was heavily regulated. The 1909 Cinematograph Act gave local authorities power to prevent the exhibition of movies, while the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), established in 1913 by the industry itself, could alter the content of films or even stop their production. Mainly concerned to police moral issues, the BBFC was also able to prohibit the production of films tackling 'controversial politics'.⁶³ Few studios, in fact, sought to make such movies, believing profits came from entertaining audiences in as unchallenging a way as possible. As a result, the successful interwar producer Victor Saville could claim that in his own work 'I never attacked the establishment in any way.'⁶⁴

Demonstrating their different regulatory regimes, when interwar filmmakers adapted novels with political themes, the outcome was strikingly consistent. The 1939 film version of A. J. Cronin's *The Stars Look Down* (1935) excised its protagonist's career as a Labour MP, despite the vital role it played in the original. Irrespective of Winifred Holtby's left-wing affiliations, Saville's 1938 rendition of *South Riding* (1935) was transformed into a paean to the National government.⁶⁵ Alexander Korda's 1936 version of H. G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come*

(1933) also ignored the author's stern critique of democracy in favour of the excitement of exploding bombs. Very unusually, the BBFC completely blocked the proposed film version of *Love on the Dole* (1933), because, like Walter Greenwood's novel, the script stressed the privations of the unemployed – and inevitably criticized government policy. Yet while 'controversial' for the cinema, it was based on a stage version passed by the Lord Chamberlain.⁶⁶ This situation changed with the Second World War.⁶⁷ In May 1940, with Labour in the coalition and Dunkirk about to be evacuated, the BBFC agreed *Love on the Dole* could be made. What had once seemed dangerous in the 1930s, wartime officials now believed had propaganda potential.⁶⁸ The war permanently weakened the authority of cinema's censors to control the depiction of politics.

Cinema went into a decline after the early 1950s, largely due to the advent of television. As a government-funded body, the BBC sought to avoid controversy and the appearance of partisanship, which meant its interwar radio dramas could tackle any subject – so long as this was not sex, religion or politics.⁶⁹ During the 1950s, those who regulated the BBC and commercial television also believed viewers needed protection from certain views, including ones that suggested not all politicians were paragons of virtue. The 1960s saw this paternalism wane such that by the start of the following decade the BBC was broadcasting dramas with openly Trotskyist agendas, much to the dismay of Conservative politicians. Indeed, by the 1990s some BBC executives and independent production companies saw their role as exposing the shortcomings of the country's political class. Thus, if the nineteenth-century political novel had promoted Westminster's virtues, by the start of the twenty-first century many television dramas reinforced popular misgivings about the institution and its inhabitants.

By the end of the twentieth century another inhibition had been cast aside – the one that prevented the dramatic depiction of real political figures. Unless they were dead, actual politicians, with one notable exception (in 1918 David Lloyd George was the first living leader to be the subject of a film biography), were not represented on stage or screen until the 1960s. Even novelists fought shy of unambiguously portraying contemporary political figures. Spring's *Fame is the Spur* was published in 1940 less than three years after the death of Ramsay MacDonald and presented a fictionalized version of the former Prime Minister's life, highlighting his vanity and careerism. The 1947 film adaptation did its best to emphasize the physical resemblance between actor Michael Redgrave and the ex-Labour leader. However, as with the novel, Redgrave's character was not called MacDonald. Similarly, while Churchill was not depicted in a British

screen production until after his death, during the Second World War certain historical Prime Ministers were given ‘Churchillian’ characteristics. *Young Winston* (1972) began a process that would see two television dramatizations of the Prime Minister’s life by 1979 and subsequently many more. Churchill would even appear in *Doctor Who* during 2010. In the 1970s television journalists also started to reconstruct contemporary political events, giving rise to the ‘docu-drama’ or ‘drama-documentary’, which mixed what was known with informed speculation. So popular did this type of drama become that Tony Blair became the first sitting Prime Minister to be regularly depicted on the small and big screen – and not in a flattering way.

Lessons learnt?

Trollope assumed that when writers taught, readers learnt. This simplistic view underpinned the Conservative MP Charles Curran’s claim that Orwell’s novel *1984* (1949)

probably had more to do than any other single factor with the Socialist defeat in the 1951 General Election. That book did more than all the speeches, all the advertisements and all the politicians to change the climate of public opinion in England.⁷⁰

It is very unlikely that *1984* enjoyed such an influence, but if it had, Orwell, who broadly supported the Labour government of the time, would have been upset.⁷¹ This illustrates dramatist David Hare’s argument that ‘A work and its reception are entirely different things.’⁷² Certainly, claims made for the influence of fiction in general vary spectacularly. Just to consider students of the novel, on the one hand are those who believe that ‘what we read affects us – drenches us ... in its assumptions’; others who argue that ‘reading provided a site for discussion, even resistance, rather than giving grounds for conformity’; and some who claim that as readers are ‘different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species’ their reactions are too differentiated to allow for meaningful generalization.⁷³ In short: it would be unwise to speculate too crudely and without evidence.⁷⁴

Establishing the exact effect of fiction is however bedevilled by a lack of adequate substantiation.⁷⁵ In the absence of audience and reader surveys of all the works contained in this book, we however can at least make sensible, informed but cautious guesses. Even so, while counting up the number of books

sold or receipts generated by a film can establish a work's popularity, it cannot tell us how individuals reacted to what they read or saw.⁷⁶ Press and other reviews might aid us in assessing the impact of fictions on certain individuals, but these figures are hardly representative.⁷⁷ Memoirs, similarly, can also help us better gauge contemporary reactions, although they will likely be distorted by hindsight.⁷⁸

To complement such material, since the 1970s US social scientists have studied the impact of screen political dramas. Their research suggests these fictions 'framed' how audiences saw issues and institutions, and 'primed' reactions to them. A film about how a candidate was packaged by his media handlers, for example, encouraged audiences to think image and its manipulation more important in determining electoral success.⁷⁹ A TV series that fictionalized the Nixon White House's Watergate break-in made viewers believe government dishonesty and immorality were significantly more important problems than before.⁸⁰ A movie depicting Senator John Glenn's career as an astronaut in heroic terms encouraged audiences to feel appreciably more positive about his candidacy for President.⁸¹ The vast majority of an audience of a film that claimed the assassination of President Kennedy was due to a conspiracy believed the evidence put to them.⁸² Finally, after watching episodes of the TV series *The West Wing* – which gave a sympathetic account of a fictional President – viewers became more positive about Presidents Clinton and Bush.⁸³ Such investigations taken together suggest that while an individual screen drama cannot overturn an audience's fundamental beliefs, it can reinforce prior opinions, if these are in sympathy with the story while increasing the salience of the narrative's subject.⁸⁴

Furthermore, students of docu-dramas, which claim to be at least partly 'based on a true story' – without indicating precisely *which* parts – believe them to be uniquely persuasive, however inaccurate they may be. Research indicates that even audiences primed with the facts are likely to believe the most blatantly erroneous screen renderings of real events.⁸⁵ This is also true of those who possess first-hand knowledge of the subject depicted. Most strikingly, Geoffrey Howe, whose resignation from the Cabinet precipitated the fall of Margaret Thatcher, recalled watching *Thatcher: The Final Days* (1991), ITV's dramatized reconstruction of her enforced exit from Number 10:

At almost every moment when my actions, my words, were being depicted, I was conscious of serious, no doubt unintentional inaccuracies. Literally nothing was quite right. Yet for all those sequences where I was not on screen, disbelief

was largely suspended. The talking, moving picture is a compelling witness. 'So that's why George' – or Peter or whoever – 'did that', I found myself thinking time and again. Beguilingly, the cameras appeared to be telling the truth, except where I positively knew them to be inventive and false.⁸⁶

If this was Howe's reaction, how much more likely is it that audiences might accept as true that part of a story beyond their experience? On the basis of the work of one early anthropologist of film: very likely indeed.⁸⁷

This does not mean, of course, that audiences are the passive victims of brain-washing. As experts in the field remind us, all fictions are open to contrasting interpretations, and people bring their own experiences to bear when they make sense of them.⁸⁸ Therefore, while plausible generalizations can be made based on the research cited above, it is still ultimately down to individuals how they react to the fictions they read or watch. But fictions can and do influence how citizens conceive of their democracy by contributing to the pool of ideas from which they draw what might be termed their 'imagined political capital', that is the repertoire of ideas they hold about a system in which they are supposedly central figures.⁸⁹

A rough guide

Those few students of British politics who have used fiction to aid their analysis usually limit themselves to novels.⁹⁰ Often political theorists, they generally favour works of 'quality', with Bernard Crick notably only seeing merit in looking at 'serious' novels because, being 'the preserve of intellectuals', they 'mirror or influence to some extent the context of political beliefs, behaviour and morality'. This was in contrast to 'popular novels', which Crick considered 'simply use unreflectively a political background for a story-line'.⁹¹ More recently, however, some have cast their net wider, looking to comedy to help them answer central questions in the study of contemporary politics.⁹²

If *A State of Play* limited itself to 'quality' fictions it would be a much shorter book, for if some of the imaginative works discussed in the ensuing chapters might qualify as High Art, many do not. The MP Gerald Kaufman even claimed that Parliamentary Novels were 'on the whole unutterable trash' and one critic described their distinguishing characteristic as 'the almost complete absence of quality'.⁹³ While differentiating between 'good' and 'bad' or kitsch art – and he clearly preferred the former – Murray Edelman believed the latter exerted

more political influence precisely *because* it traded on familiar, hackneyed stereotypes.⁹⁴ Indeed, the once-derided Hollywood Western is now seen as an important way of appreciating how many Americans came to understand the meaning of citizenship, law and political authority.⁹⁵

Compared to those in political science, historians have been more willing to use an eclectic range of fictional forms to reconstruct that which Raymond Williams described as the 'structure of feeling'.⁹⁶ Notably, the Victorian music hall and comic strips have been analyzed to improve our understanding of how relations between the classes and genders were popularly conceived.⁹⁷ There are also those who claim that during the same period melodrama shaped perceptions of politics.⁹⁸ As its *Big Barn Farm* opening suggests, *A State of Play* addresses all parts of the artistic spectrum, from works that embraced complexity to those produced for what were once described as 'industrial audiences'. This means the book assesses different kinds of narratives, genres and forms written by a variety of figures, from active participants in politics to those who considered themselves wholly 'un-political'. Some stories are set in Westminster while others are located in milieux into which a political figure or event temporarily intrudes; politics might be a central subject or it could be marginal. Some of these narratives are dramatic – even melodramatic – but many are comedies. Indeed, while the prevalence of humour in fictions about politics might tell its own story, it does not necessarily mean the subject was not taken seriously. For, during the time when censorship prevailed, comedy's association with a carnival-like sense of disorder gave writers for the big and small screen licence to ridicule public authority.⁹⁹ Indeed, even after most restrictions on free speech had been lifted, two of the more popular and intelligent recent political fictions were television sitcoms: *Yes, Minister* and *The Thick of It*.

Each work of fiction has its own artistic, intellectual, socio-economic and temporal context within which it might be analyzed. That is how fiction is usually discussed, and one reason why the chapters are ordered chronologically is to allow *A State of Play* to pay regard to the times in which works were produced. Yet, the book also looks beyond context for changes and continuities across time and between the different genres and forms in which contrasting writers tackled politics. This is something few have done.¹⁰⁰ This panoramic timeframe provides us with an unrivalled insight into the shifting ways in which politics has been depicted. In certain important aspects much of substance has however not altered. From the time when Britons were governed by Tudor monarchs, fictions about politics often presented their subject in negative terms.

Indeed, according to one political scientist interested in why people now ‘hate politics’, the dramas of William Shakespeare form part of a ‘timeless’ critique.¹⁰¹ It is certainly true that many stories contain the same kinds of characters and situations. There have on the other hand been intriguing and significant changes in the way fictions have critiqued the exercise of political power, notably in the representation of men and women, the rise of the conspiracy narrative, and the increasing depiction of real political events and figures.

More of a rough guide to the subject than an encyclopedia, the book employs the case study approach, highlighting certain works in some detail to make general points. To the uninitiated it might seem unlikely, but one of the frustrations of researching and writing *A State of Play* has been the huge number of fictions about politics that have been produced over the years. Indeed, had I known this, I may have reconsidered undertaking the project! As a result, many works have been excluded, and a few well-known authors do not receive the attention their devotees might think they deserve. However, to compensate, some relatively obscure or ostensibly unlikely fictions are studied at length.

A State of Play is not much concerned with how accurate a version of political reality fictions gave the public. As was observed in 1895, ‘we should have no dramas worth seeing if the dry and common routine of modern political and social life were faithfully delineated.’¹⁰² In all forms of representation, including the political, distortion is inherent, and in fiction, drama is always of more value than accuracy. Some have, however, been very irritated by fiction’s lack of realism, or rather its failure to reflect what *they* took to be reality. As the *Guardian* complained in 1991, ‘As soon as our playwrights venture into politics they betray a kind of inexplicable immaturity’ and treat the subject ‘in the most simplistic fashion’ which is invariably ‘infantile’ and ‘one-dimensional’.¹⁰³ The editorialist clearly had an axe to grind about a certain breed of left-wing dramatist, but the general point was pertinent: fiction disfigures reality. In some sense, therefore, every political fiction is ‘simplistic’ and ‘one-dimensional’. For *A State of Play*, the important questions are why they assume the shape they do and why their nature has changed or remained consistent over time. In answering these questions we should be better able to understand the meanings Britons have attached to their representative politics.

When the book refers to ‘real’ and fictional politics, as it often does, the distinction between the two should not be fetishized. As is increasingly recognized, art and politics are both representing practices that share what Michael Saward has described as ‘strong aesthetic and cultural dimensions’.¹⁰⁴ They are furthermore inextricably linked to each other, for just as real politics creates the

necessary material for fictional politics, so the former helps shape perceptions of the latter. If writers are responsible for fictional politics, so are real politicians.¹⁰⁵ It has even been suggested that fiction might help us better understand the true nature of real politics.¹⁰⁶

It would, in conclusion, be wrong to think that the British were perpetually panting for fictions about politics. When cinema patrons in 1930s Bolton were asked what they wanted to see on the screen, their top choices were 'humour', 'beautiful things' and 'action'; 'politics' was the second least popular choice (after 'killing').¹⁰⁷ There have nonetheless been enough fictions about the exercise of political power to suggest that these evoked a popular response, one sufficient to encourage individuals to feel it worth their while to write about the subject. And when they wrote, in big as well as small ways, such authors helped Britons imagine what their country's representative democracy was *really* like.

Notes

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