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Monday, 8 June 1998

Mr. Brian Lamb
C-SPAN 'BookNotes'
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Dear Mr. Lamb,

Since 'BookNotes' is one of the rare moments one can turn to for informed discussion on television, I hesitate suggesting the possibility that one of your guests misstated a fundamental profile of Walter Lippmann. I refer to your interview of Prof. Linda Stone concerning her biography of William James, Genuine Reality, aired Sunday, 7 June 1998. I'm not proposing to recast her thoughts about Lippmann, but indicating only that her statement that Lippmann was a man of the people may be at odds with his practices. And I pretend to be neither a student of James or Lippman, nor have I, as of yet, read Prof. Stone's book, which was suggestively examined during the interview.

Recently, while searching the 'Expanded Academic Index' of Infotrac on a library system, I came across an interview with Stuart Ewen regarding his book PR! A Social History of Spin (Basic Books, 1996). The interviewer is Steven Heller, and the interview is entitled "In spin we trust: a conversation with Stuart Ewen" and appeared in Print, v51 n3 p94(7). I won't quote pages because my copy is from the Infotrac printout.

Heller and Ewen discuss somewhat in depth Gustav Le Bon's book The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind. Here, the important thing to keep in mind is that Ewen considers that Le Bon is "in fact, at least as influential as Freud....and was bedside reading for influential political figures, including Teddy Roosevelt and the journalist and pundit Walter Lippmann." In

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effect, Ewen credits Le Bon with the first modern text on the techniques of social engineering through propaganda; but Le Bon is not accused, in the interview, of being a practitioner of public relations. Which leads to an extended quote, and the reason for this note to you:

Heller: How were Le Bon's ideas filtered into American culture?

Ewen: Walter Lippmann, who was completely immersed in his [Le Bon's] theories, helped to found the Committee of Public Information during World War I to promote the war to the American public.

[NB: I believe Dr. Stone stressed that James was opposed to war; Lippmann, therefore, drew an independent conclusion, independent that is, of his mentor's philosophy]

Heller: But Lippmann was part of the Progressive movement that attacked elites for using authority to the detriment of social welfare.

Ewen: The period of World War I marked the end of Progressivism, a shift from a middle-class intelligentsia that called for social reform because of egregious violations at the top of society, which were leading to unrest below, to an intelligentsia that was making its peace with the top of society in order to bring an end to unrest. If you read what Lippmann wrote in 1910, when he was a student at Harvard, you know he was a participatory democrat. But by 1914, when he was still an editor of The New Republic, he wrote a book called Drift and Mastery, in which he stated that the climate of expose, the climate of reform, had unwittingly given rise to society where nobody respected authority anymore, resulting in crisis. He began to assert that the next job for Progressives was to assert mastery over a chaotic world [this transformation, may I note, is similar to Marshall McLuhan's disavowal of his early attacks on technommercialism following his rise to academic prominence in the 50s]. At that moment, the agenda driving Walter Lippmann began to coincide with the agenda driving much of America's business leadership: how to control a chaotic and potentially dangerous society. By 1922, he had written another book, Public Opinion, which is, **even today**, a textbook for understanding the strategies of power in the contemporary world (my emphasis).

Heller: Did Lippmann provide a strategy for public relations?

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Ewen: He laid out the problem that confronted the modern executive in what he referred to as the 'great society' - or large-scale international society. (By executive, he meant a political or corporate leader.) The problem was that most people believed that society should be determined by force of their collective will, but that ordinary people are totally incapable of even comprehending the society they live in, much less where it should be going. Their concept of the world, he said, was not based in reality, but rather driven by "pictures in their heads."

Heller: Was Lippmann saying that the purpose of public relations was to manipulate those pictures?

Ewen: He felt that if you present people with factual truth, it only complicates things, because then they want to discuss it. When people start discussing things, you've got trouble. He didn't completely reject the idea that people were capable of reason. He just felt that reason would only get in the way of leadership. Lippmann was perfectly willing to create the illusion of democracy. He just wasn't willing to practice it.

Heller: Would you say that this illusion of democracy is what underscores the whole practice of PR?

Ewen: Absolutely. The emergence of public relations is incomprehensible apart from the rise of democracy. And to some extent, public relations has been one of the primary mechanisms by which elites have sought to maintain their position in a society that is ostensibly democratic.

This quotation is, of course, evidence that I cannot anymore imagine Lippmann as a man of the people following exposure to Ewen's comments. Prof. Stone also establishes clearly that William James opposed the thrust to professionalism, which was somewhat in adolescence during James' lifetime, when she refers to his essay "The Ph.D. Octopus(title?)". And she mentions something about Harvard not being the place for learning(?) right at the start of the segment. My conclusion: Linda Stone values the development of an individual's potential, but has not studied the forces impinging upon Lippmann's influential trajectory.

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Furthermore, Mr. Lamb, you say that you had examined a bookstore's shelves and found the Jameses well-represented. I suggest that this stock exists, not because of any commitment to **aesthetic experience**, but rather, to a devotion to culture FOR SALE, a hallmark of our technommercial socialization. 'BookNotes' itself is such a rare performance of 'Literacy as Experience,' as it remains in American culture, that any day I expect to be addressed as 'Dear Gentle Reader.' And David Gergen, on Lehrer's Newshour, becomes nothing more than a slaking of thirst at a public water fountain. Therefore, one is grateful to you for staging these forums in public aesthetics. If you would doubt my argument regarding what sets 'BookNotes' apart, consider the commercialization of "public television." And C-Span proper provides millions of Americans an opportunity to re-connect with their American citizenship. QED: C-Span's value is entirely un-Lippmann-like, in my opinion.

If ever I were to wish I could have another's job, the carrying-on of this intellectual refreshment strikes me as the ideal vocation! But, imagining 'BookNotes' without your gracious performance, by which you let your audience feel that you have as much to learn as we do (and I'm sure you really do) is not to know the 'BookNotes Experience.' And finally, I hope you continue venturing into the area I would call, after Bill Moyers, "The Public Mind," for it is the 'there' which professionalism has spun into non-existence; yet, of course, where the vast majority of Americans live. To C-Span's continued success, my toast!

Thank you.

Sincerely,

