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INTRODUCTION

A Mind and Pen

FEW WRITERS HAD more influence on American politics in the twentieth century than Walter Lippmann. From the early 1910s to the late 1960s, he shaped the ordinary language of political argument in and beyond the United States. Lippmann reached millions of readers every week through articles and syndicated columns in newspapers and magazines. He wrote two dozen books. As a journalist and political theorist, Lippmann helped define terms and ideas like democracy and liberalism. He coined or fashioned other words that went into wide circulation. Lippmann turned the noun “stereotype” from a technical printers’ term for a kind of newspaper plate into a social and psychological concept about public opinion.¹ He was a participant in some of the earliest anglophone debates about totalitarianism.² Two weeks after the word “robot” was first uttered on a New York stage, Lippmann used it casually in a book review on the US party system.³ At midcentury he turned the vague phrase “cold war” into a world-historical category for American foreign policy: “the Cold War.”⁴

As well as lexical clairvoyance, Lippmann was remarkable for his breadth, versatility, and sheer durability. His character and celebrity have long fascinated scholars. Ronald Steel’s classic biography, published in 1980 and still indispensable, focused on Lippmann’s private life and connections across the US and global elite.⁵ His inner subjectivities and behind-the-scenes activities are enduring topics of interest.⁶ But the basis of Lippmann’s influence and historical significance was his published work. If his words and ideas have been less studied, this is partly because his range and productivity are real problems for historians. Lippmann was a relentless and expansive writer in the public sphere; he also matters for academic disciplines like political science, international relations, and communications studies.⁷ He has an omnipresence but is hard to place.⁸

Lippmann appears in so many contexts and moments that he can seem chronically peripatetic and inconsistent, always changing his mind, moving on elsewhere and everywhere.

For all his networked globetrotting, Lippmann spent most of his days sitting at his desk, reading a book or writing a column. Brisk and fastidious, he worked metronomically in New York and Washington, DC. Much of Lippmann's real life was a public life on the page. He left few thoughts unpublished, seemed remote to others, and seldom looked inward or backward. When Lippmann started a diary in 1914, its opening sentence announced his "dislike of self-consciousness."⁹ It soon became a bare list of people met, things read, articles planned, and the like. His later diaries, when kept, were appointment books filled with famous names and entries like "worked all day" and "worked on my book" and "worked at my desk."¹⁰ Lippmann's many connections served these logorrheic needs. He fixed his gaze on public affairs, while friends wondered in vain about his private self. "W.L. has a definite art as a mind, and a pen," as Louis Brandeis observed. "For the rest we must look elsewhere."¹¹

This book puts Lippmann at his desk to explore the content of his work from the Progressive Era to the Cold War. His written output, for better and for worse, helped define the public debates and discursive parameters of modern American politics. By exploring his ideas in their historical context, the chapters below shed new light on Lippmann's political thought across many domains and genres. He wrote about public opinion and press freedom, urban reform and social psychology, economic and foreign policy, and sundry other subjects. His interlocutors and critics were leading figures like Upton Sinclair, W.E.B. Du Bois, Hannah Arendt, John Maynard Keynes, and dozens more journalists, political theorists, and social scientists. With access to both mass and elite audiences, and with a formidable intellectual dexterity, Lippmann was a prominent American example of the "in-between figures" who shaped the twentieth century by producing and distributing "the political thought that mattered politically."¹²

Lippmann provides a particular lens on liberal political thinking in the United States. His career spanned the long rise and many crises of American liberalism from Woodrow Wilson to Lyndon Johnson. Working at the intersection of daily news and democratic theory, Lippmann shaped and sometimes defined the terms of liberal public argument. He was not a system-building philosopher, nor an ur-liberal archetype, but a political writer engaged in controversies with his contemporaries. Lippmann raised questions that many found compelling, though fewer accepted his answers. How can democracy work in the modern world?

What kinds of liberalism might it sustain? Who is journalism for and what should it cover? Which experts are trustworthy? Can urban liberals win national elections? What defines a cold war? Is America an empire? Who and where is the public? Why do politics? Lippmann's questions were sharply put and seriously debated. They mattered in the past and resonate with the present.

Political, Not Technocratic

The scope and substance of Lippmann's work have often been obscured by claims about expertise and technocracy. According to a potted biography that shapes many histories of American political thought, Lippmann's early democratic faith was fundamentally shaken by the propagandistic and disillusioning First World War, after which he embraced technocratic government in books like *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925).¹³ Lippmann's association with antipolitical expert rule has been entrenched through contrasts with the philosopher John Dewey. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Dewey argued for deliberative democracy and responded partly to Lippmann. As an analytic framework, "the Lippmann-Dewey debate" was constructed by the media scholar James Carey in the 1980s.¹⁴ It contrasted technocratic government with democratic politics by setting Lippmann's account of expertise against Dewey's account of deliberation. Through a clear and binary opposition, the Lippmann-Dewey debate served various disciplinary needs in history, sociology, communications studies, science and technology studies, social criticism, political science, and philosophy. It reflected key trends of the late twentieth century: assorted cultural turns, the revival of pragmatism, and participatory democratic theory.¹⁵

But the Lippmann-Dewey debate is a bad framework for understanding the history of political thought in the early twentieth century. Lippmann and Dewey agreed on many things, and contemporaries did not see their differences as an era-defining argument. Nor can the historical record sustain the view that Lippmann was simply an antipolitical theorist of technocracy. He wrote too much and too widely for his work to be seen primarily or convincingly through binary contrasts with Dewey.¹⁶ Like many others, Lippmann saw expertise as specialized knowledge, crucial and inevitable in the modern world. He thought experts should participate in policymaking and democratic governance, while also being subject to forms of public oversight and scrutiny.¹⁷ Lippmann denied that experts could provide a plausible source of techno-political legitimacy. "The power

of the expert,” he wrote in *Public Opinion*, “depends upon separating himself from those who make the decisions, upon not caring, in his expert self, what decision is made.”¹⁸ Thus Lippmann saw experts as valuable technocratic voices within a wider political process. Because expertise was disinterested, because it was in his view separate from power, it could not create or sustain the rule of an omniscient elite.

When experts plunged into politics themselves, Lippmann could and did contest their claims in public. Just after *Public Opinion* was published, he launched a major public critique of the expertise behind intelligence testing. Amid the ascendance of apparently scientific claims about the average “mental age” of Americans, Lippmann attacked the expert tester Lewis Terman as dangerously elitist and unscientific. Within “the Lippmann-Terman controversy,” as contemporaries named it, Dewey publicly supported Lippmann’s critique of intelligence testing, for he also wanted to subject expertise to democratic control. This debate with Terman undermines the value of contrasts between Lippmann and Dewey by underlining their core agreement in a key public contest over expert authority. The Lippmann-Terman controversy also reveals a range of perspectives on the politics of expertise in modern democracies. Both Lippmann’s *Phantom Public* and Dewey’s *Public and Its Problems* engaged with and partly emerged from debates about intelligence testing.¹⁹ To see Lippmann simply as a technocrat is to use a stereotype in precisely his sense of reducing complex realities to “standard versions” and “current patterns” through particular modes of communication—in this case, scholarly repetition of Lippmann-Dewey frameworks and related generalizations about postwar disillusionment.²⁰

Lippmann attacked technocracy at many points in his career. Among his earliest publications is a hostile review of *Philip Dru: Administrator* (1912), a utopian romance of technocratic power written by Wilson’s advisor Colonel House and published anonymously. Lippmann found the novel flat because it avoided democratic and political issues. “If the author is really a man of affairs,” he wrote, then *Philip Dru* showed “how juvenile a great man can be.”²¹ When a movement for “Technocracy” emerged in the 1930s, Lippmann published a multipart critique of its “scientific hocus pocus.”²² Beyond these attacks on technocratic utopias, Lippmann argued that technocratic politicians could not grasp what politics was about. Herbert Hoover was a good engineer but he struggled as president, Lippmann thought, because technocrats misunderstood that political action “deals with matters peculiar to politics, with a complex of material circumstances, of historic deposit, of human passion.” In politics, “the problems of business or engineering do

not provide an analogy.”²³ Lippmann held this view throughout his life. Its ideological valence could vary; his critiques of the New Deal were partly about technocratic bureaucracy. But he broadly argued that experts were disinterested specialists, that scientists and engineers were bad at politics, and that good politicians were more than mere technocrats.

For Lippmann, politics was fundamental, despite and because of its frustrations and potential. His first book, *A Preface to Politics* (1913), argued from a left-liberal perspective that “public affairs do have an enormous and intimate effect upon our lives. They make or unmake us.”²⁴ Lippmann never wavered from this basic position. He saw politics as the public affairs created by the complex of material, historical, and psychological circumstances in a society. They could be changed by public argument and demanded more than expertise alone. Even as he probed its problems and uncertainties, Lippmann always saw public opinion as the most important mechanism of modern democratic politics. His last work of political theory, *The Public Philosophy* (1955), was a conservative jeremiad about democratic decline, which nevertheless insisted that a public interest existed and that public affairs mattered.²⁵

Lippmann’s career was not a one-note argument for the rule of experts; it was a six-decade commentary on the vicissitudes of politics. It is implausible to see as primarily technocratic the work of someone who focused so intently on the stuff of political life. Instead of developing abstract theories of expertise, Lippmann wrote about public affairs in the shifting political scene: politicians, citizens, opinion, elections, parties, legislation, protests, the press, and much else.

Liberal and Variable

Taking off the technocratic lens that has clouded scholarship on Lippmann reveals a wider set of debates about twentieth-century American liberalism.²⁶ His writing shaped this large and complex tradition in various ways and contexts.²⁷ In broad ideological terms, Lippmann opposed the major alternatives to liberalism in US and world politics. He helped with the boundary work that separated liberal ideas from fascism, communism, “totalitarianism,” most socialisms, and various modes of anti-liberal conservatism. In narrow biographical terms, Lippmann took the well-trodden path from young liberal socialist to old conservative liberal. But this overall trajectory, while true in a general sense, involved many changes of mind, new starts, false starts, idiosyncrasies, and disputes with contemporaries. By tracing his evolution and interventions, this book uses

Lippmann's intellectual life to examine the politics of liberalism beyond claims about expertise and technocracy.

Like many liberals before and since, Lippmann's attitude to democracy was ambivalent. He was a liberal democrat who cared more about liberalism than democracy and wrote much about tensions between them.²⁸ Lippmann saw democracy as the dominant political force in the modern world and linked its power with public opinion, echoing liberals in earlier centuries. "I am a very great admirer of de Tocqueville," he wrote in 1925.²⁹ In late career Lippmann wondered about writing a Tocqueville biography, "but I shy away from it on the ground that I am too ignorant of 19th Century history."³⁰ Still, Lippmann's broad view of democracy was a Tocquevillian mélange of intense engagement, piercing critique, obsession, watchfulness, and mounting anxiety, all underwritten by the conviction that modern conditions were irresistibly democratic. As a democratic theorist, Lippmann produced sharp critiques of received wisdom, new accounts of public opinion, and careful engagements with theories of journalism. He published some pungently antidemocratic sentences, worried about mobs and demagogues, and voiced elitist views. But he also backed the rules of the game and saw no alternative to democracy in the basic politics of modernity. Both for and against different kinds of democracy in different political contexts, Lippmann was always sure of its legitimizing centrality to the twentieth century.³¹ He approached democracy as a modern political fact with outcomes that could be liberal or not.

In the 1910s and 1920s, Lippmann developed a distinctive account of modern democracy's paradox. This emerged from his encounters with the British social theorist Graham Wallas, whose book *The Great Society* (1914) was central to Lippmann's ideas about modernity. Wallas argued that modern social conditions were radically new and formidably large and complex. "The Great Society" was a plural modernity produced by capitalism, urbanization, mass communication, and other modernizing processes that worked at high speed on a huge scale. It could be understood, Wallas claimed, through social psychology.³² These claims shaped how Lippmann thought about democracy. In *Public Opinion*, he developed a social psychology of opinion formation, based on the concepts of stereotypes and pseudo-environments, to engage with and critique earlier constitutionalist approaches to democratic theory.³³ A paradox resulted: Lippmann argued that democracy through public opinion defined modern politics, but that modernity also made opinion formation ever-more difficult. Modern conditions meant that public opinion often struggled to sustain or perceive a clear public interest, even as it governed regardless.

So a dual sense of fragility and centrality defined Lippmann's democratic theory. He thought modernity both mandated and impeded democracy.

The best way out of this paradox, for Lippmann, was to develop a democratic politics of liberal modernization. If modern conditions made democracy inevitable but also difficult, then liberals could work through and improve these conditions with progressive reforms to education, health, and other public services. These reforms would help create a modernizing democratic state with sustained public support. Thus Lippmann thought liberals should engage with democracy to produce and sustain liberal publics. This politics had a specific incarnation for him in the practical urban liberalism of Al Smith, the governor of New York in the 1920s. Smith was a popular tribune and progressive reformer with great political talent, Lippmann argued, who modernized a large industrial state and represented an urban-liberal future for America. Smith's New York struck Lippmann as democracy working well. As editorial director of the *New York World*, a leading pro-Smith newspaper, Lippmann supported and interpreted Smith's project and its limits. Decades before the Cold War, focused on the local politics of New York, Lippmann became a modernization theorist who claimed that modernity in general, and urbanization in particular, could maintain liberalism through democracy.³⁴ In this sense, he was a kind of interwar Cold War liberal.

The crises of the 1930s challenged and reoriented Lippmann's political thinking.³⁵ As the Great Society gave way to the Great Depression, much changed politically across the United States and world. Crucial to Lippmann's shifting views in these years was the concept of totalitarianism, which he came to see as a politics of lawlessness, found in fascist and communist states. The idea of lawless totalitarianism pushed him back toward constitutionalism and away from the psychology that drove his earlier work. His liberalism became more conservative in national and global contexts. Lippmann supported the New Deal at first but turned against it during the constitutional turmoil of 1935–37, when he wrote *The Good Society* (1937). This book was more driven by domestic New Deal politics than many have recognized, but it also helped galvanize an emerging network of European neoliberals at the "Colloque Walter Lippmann" in 1938. Lippmann's involvement with early neoliberalism was both significant and brief, for he quickly refocused his economic thought on wartime planning and military Keynesianism. From the 1930s onward, he worked at larger and more abstract scales of analysis. Less grounded in New York contexts, and with a more global reach and audience, Lippmann moved to Washington and wrote mostly about national and world affairs.

In the 1940s he focused on foreign policy. Here Lippmann is often read as a “realist” theorist of international relations, less concerned with ideological crusades than with national interests and strategic analysis. But his approach to foreign policy was also explicitly imperial, ideological, and even civilizational. For Lippmann saw American power through a politics of empire.³⁶ He was ideologically committed to imperialism and framed global dominance as “The American Destiny” from 1938 to 1941. He then helped naturalize US empire as “world leadership” from 1942 to 1945. On a world scale, Lippmann’s liberalism was fully compatible with these imperial commitments. Indeed his imperialism was bound up with both his internationalism and his realism. Lippmann’s foreign policy thinking reveals a range of entanglements between liberalism and empire in the twentieth century. His concept of “the Cold War,” developed in a critique of the diplomat George Kennan in 1947, incorporated these broadly imperial claims and hierarchies into a potent historical description of midcentury international relations. The discourse of “Cold War liberalism,” then, was partly defined conceptually by Lippmann’s earlier views about empire.³⁷

Lippmann grew into a conservative liberal grandee in the 1950s and 1960s. He stood within and worked to sustain the liberal consensus that helped structure midcentury US politics.³⁸ In some ways he felt vindicated, for liberalism had reached a kind of zenith in domestic public affairs. Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” was a series of progressive reforms with a slogan that echoed Wallas’s *Great Society*. There was now a national constituency for the urban-liberal agenda that had defined Al Smith’s New York. American foreign policy was by and large imperial, bipartisan, and committed to the Cold War. And yet Lippmann worried that liberalism seemed frail. He fretted in particular about antiliberal conservatism, a rising political formation, and he became a target for conservatives like William F. Buckley Jr. and Phyllis Schlafly, who built and sustained antiliberal publics. But it was the Vietnam War, escalated by liberals and cheered by conservatives, that worried Lippmann the most. He saw Vietnam as revealing imperial overreach and hubris; he urged neutralization from 1961 and opposed escalation in 1965. Lippmann came to argue that empire abroad threatened to destroy liberal democracy at home. He ended his career in 1967, furious with Johnson and sensing liberal collapse.

Lippmann contained multitudes and contradicted himself readily and variously over the decades. He expressed and often heightened the contradictions of American liberalism. But his changing mind had clear habits and interests, tested and developed in public debate, and available for historical analysis. I have no wish to celebrate or defend Lippmann’s political

thought as a coherent liberal project. Some of his thinking may seem plausible, such as his social psychology. Much to me seems indefensible, particularly his foreign policy. From a historical perspective, the deeper problem is that Lippmann cared less about building a philosophy than about engaging with live political arguments.³⁹ There is no liberal system available in Lippmann; there are only past debates in shifting contexts, some of which have vanished, and to which he contributed a sprawling corpus of texts. So this book aims for ruthless historicization rather than normative resurrection. Lippmann haunts the present crises of liberalism and democracy, but understanding his relevance today requires a careful historical account of what he meant in the past.

Journalism as a Vocation

Adopting this approach means paying attention to journalism. Lippmann's journalistic practice and theory were central to his intellectual biography. His books often reprinted articles first written for the daily, weekly, or monthly press. He shaped many debates at once and could write on three or four subjects in a single week. His full breadth seems to me impossible to encompass. Consequently, this book does not provide a comprehensive account of Lippmann's every thought and intervention. Instead it examines a set of debates, inevitably selective but I hope representative, that historicize key aspects of his work and wider significance. Lippmann's books cannot simply be lined up and read in sequence as abstract theoretical statements.⁴⁰ His core themes and ideas become clearer, and the differences between his books are less confusing, when his journalism is brought more fully into the picture.

Lippmann thought journalism was a vocation with political responsibilities to inform public opinion and help democracy function. In *Liberty and the News* (1920), he argued that newspapers were critical institutions for opinion formation, and that bad and "false" reporting was routine in the mainstream press. If lying journalism defined the public sphere, Lippmann asked, was democracy really free? Could liberty exist if the public lacked access to reliable and truthful news? Professional journalists in a reformed newspaper industry, he suggested, could achieve editorial independence, do honest work, and serve the public interest. Lippmann did not see journalistic "objectivity" as a form of political neutrality. Rather, he saw journalism as a democratic job that helped modern society "live successfully toward the future."⁴¹ Lippmann was vocationally committed to a liberal political vision that linked news with freedom and democracy

with public opinion. At the same time, he wrote incisively about the daily challenges of forging these links and doing good journalism.

Max Weber also thought journalism was difficult, inherently political, and inwardly demanding. In his lecture “Politics as a Vocation” (1919), Weber said that “a really *good* piece of journalistic work demands at least as good a mind as that of any scholar, above all because it has to be produced immediately, to order, and because it has to be immediately *effective*.” This need for efficacy, the imperative to make an impact, meant that journalists themselves were political actors. They should have both convictions and “the *feeling* of responsibility,” Weber argued, because working in journalism meant coping with “particularly difficult inner demands. It is no small thing,” he stressed, “to frequent the salons of the mighty of this earth, apparently on an equal footing, often being flattered on all sides because one is feared.” And it was “no small thing to have to deliver prompt and convincing pronouncements, at the immediate behest of the ‘market,’ on anything and everything, on every conceivable problem in life, and to do so without falling prey, not only to utter banality, but, above all, to indignity and self-exposure with all their merciless consequences.”⁴²

Lippmann ran these risks for six decades. His career involved moments of notorious misjudgment and persistent dynamics of ideological conformity with prevailing elite opinion.⁴³ Comfortable in the salons of the mighty, Lippmann published many pronouncements that soon became stale or worse. But within and despite these dynamics, he produced journalism that was generally serious and often effective. Like Weber, Lippmann thought that modern conditions were specialized and disenchanted, that professionalization could produce versions of objectivity, that politics was a stern calling in a democratic age, and that journalism was likewise demanding. “Only the discipline of a modernized logic can open the door to reality,” Lippmann wrote.⁴⁴ Weber thought similarly that modernity required “the trained ability to look at the realities of life with an unsparing gaze, to bear these realities and be a match for them inwardly.”⁴⁵ This well described Lippmann’s sense of his self and gaze.

When Lippmann delivered his own lecture on the vocation of journalism in 1960, at seventy, he reiterated his view that it was part of American liberalism. “The Job of the Washington Correspondent,” he argued, was to inform public opinion and help sustain democratic freedom by reporting and interpreting the news. Lippmann suggested that journalism fitted into “the American liberal tradition,” because news interpretation was pragmatic and experimental work that American liberals did well. He saw no still point for journalism and, partly for this reason, had no

single theory of liberalism. There was only the ongoing and ever-changing predicament of political judgment, from which there was no technocratic escape. Lippmann claimed that, in a particular sense, journalists were citizens with especially heavy democratic obligations: “We do what every sovereign citizen is supposed to do but has not the time or the interest to do. . . . It is no mean calling.”⁴⁶

Lippmann’s journalistic persona was defined by a public mask of cool and impersonal sobriety. Washington correspondents admired his analytic capacity and envied his career.⁴⁷ Yet readers and colleagues also thought Lippmann was eerily detached from human concerns, whatever his other qualities. “A person might be thrilled to gaze at him on a moonlight night but there’s no comfort in him,” wrote Heywood Broun of the Lippmann character in his baseball novel *The Sun Field* (1923).⁴⁸ Lippmann disliked romanticism in journalism and never became a dashing foreign reporter.⁴⁹ He painted deft portraits of other people, especially in obituaries.⁵⁰ But notwithstanding his interests in psychology, Lippmann’s writing revealed little of his inner life and private self. He routinely concealed or suppressed feelings of fear, joy, guilt, pleasure, shame, doubt, and turmoil.

The mask became his face. Over the years Lippmann’s public self displaced the person within to produce a wholly public consciousness, horrifyingly able to deny and displace, and comically incapable of genuine introspection. He got writer’s block when he tried a memoir in old age. Looking at his diaries, he found nothing there, so he “made a list of years of my life and against them I made some jottings about events and about people.” Lippmann claimed that his first memory, recalled from age four, was the financial crisis of 1893. “What I seem to remember,” he wrote, “is a feeling of anxiety which my grandmother, who had not been trained in modern child psychology, conveyed to me.” Adding nothing beyond this, Lippmann proceeded to his next big life event: the election of 1896, for which he was seven. “Searching my memory all I can dredge up is a visual image of McKinley.”⁵¹ He soon abandoned the memoir, and we should perhaps be grateful, for Lippmann’s daily habits were a deeply conventional dance of bourgeois male respectability. The mundane reality is that he was usually at his desk, in a meeting, out to lunch, or travelling. To relax he walked, did carpentry, had dogs, played golf and tennis, and watched plays and movies.

Lippmann matters because his mind and pen were formative aspects of American political thinking, not because he was right or nice. He influenced the opinions of citizens in their millions and helped set agendas for several academic disciplines. The questions he raised and the arguments

he made spanned many kinds of politics and cannot be interpreted as purely technocratic. Rather, Lippmann's historical significance lies in the shifting content of his public writing and its varied impact on American liberalism between the 1910s and 1960s. During these decades he shaped key debates about the problems and paradoxes of democracy, expertise, journalism, public opinion, the Cold War, and more. Lippmann remains a protean, relevant, and fraught political thinker in the twenty-first century. His ideas are often at stake in the crises that shake the United States and world today. By historicizing Lippmann's thought across the twentieth century, this book offers a new study of his past meanings that can illuminate and complicate perspectives on the present. Lippmann's work emerged from a complex history and should be seen with a parallel sense of historical complexity.

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