



*Routledge Innovators in Political Theory*

# MICHAEL PAUL ROGIN

## DERANGEMENT AND LIBERALISM

Edited by  
Alyson Cole and George Shulman



# Michael Paul Rogin

Michael Paul Rogin's scholarship profoundly altered the scope, content, and disposition of political theory. He reconstituted the field by opening it to an array of texts, performances, and methods previously considered beyond the purview of the discipline. His work addressed the relationship between dimensions of politics typically split apart – institutional power and cultural forms, material interests and symbolic meanings, class projects and identity politics, the public and the private. Rogin's scholarship enlarges our sense of the borders and genres defining political theory as a field and enriches our capacity to think critically and creatively about the political.

The editors have focused on three categories of substantive innovation:

## Demonology and Countersubversion

Rogin used the concepts “countersubversive tradition” and “political demonology” to theorize how constitutive exclusions and charged images of otherness generated imagined national community. He exposed not only the dynamics of suppressing and delegitimizing political opposition, but also how politics itself is devalued and displaced.

## The Psychic Life of Liberal Society

Rogin addressed the essential contradiction in liberalism as both an ideology and a regime – how a polity professing equality, liberty, and pluralist toleration engages in genocide, slavery, and imperial war.

## Political Mediation: Institutions and Culture

Rogin demonstrated how cultural forms – pervasive myths, literary and cinematic works – mediate political life, and how political institutions mediate cultural energies and aspirations.

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## Derangement and Liberalism

**Edited by**  
**Alyson Cole and**  
**George Shulman**

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**For all of Mike Rogin's students and his students' students**



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# Introduction

## The political thought of Michael Rogin

*Alyson Cole and George Shulman*

Michael Rogin's scholarship altered the scope and content of political theory by opening the field to an array of texts, performances, and methods not previously considered legitimate. His work metabolized two primary contexts: first, the post-World War II crisis in both liberal and Marxist theories of politics, whose rationalist approaches to material interest could not explain European fascism or its meaning; second, the demonization of the civil rights movement and the disaster of the Vietnam War in the United States, which posed a similar impasse for behavioral social science and liberal-pluralist models of interest-group politics. In response, Rogin drew on psychoanalytic theory to put individual and collective subjectivity at the center of politics, by focusing on motivation and fantasy, on what people desire, how they symbolize it, and why. In doing so, he was recalling Plato's foundational connection between the soul and city (or psyche and society) to propose how political and libidinal economies are inseparably entwined, at once material and symbolic, racialized and gendered, personal and political (1992, Book Two). Digesting emerging feminist theories of the family, gender, and sexuality, Rogin took the idea of "the personal is political" in unexpected and fruitful directions. Perhaps most importantly, he exposed the dynamics by which political opposition is delegitimized, difference suppressed, and the political itself displaced. While his work theorized the significant events in post-World War II American politics – McCarthyism, black insurgency, the Vietnam War, racial backlash, the New Right, Reagan's presidency, and the conflicts of the Clinton era – his texts have become only more politically germane since his untimely death in November 2001. By tracing Rogin's enduring themes and generative insights, this opening essay introduces selections of his work, and suggests the salience that we will elaborate in the concluding chapter.

Born in 1937, the son of a labor organizer, Michael Rogin was raised in Queens, New York. He attended Harvard University for undergraduate studies, and then the University of Chicago, completing his doctorate in three years. In 1963 he joined the faculty of the political science department at the University of California at Berkeley, where he remained for his entire academic career. Rogin thus lived, taught, and wrote at the emergent center of the New Left, Black Power, and counter-cultural movements that transfixed American life,

## 2 Introduction

challenged core institutions, and resonated across the Euro-Atlantic world. As those movements generated both organized opposition to the Vietnam War and “second wave” feminism, so Rogin’s scholarship situated contemporary conflicts – about race, empire, gender, and nation – in historical as well as theoretical contexts. Although hired initially as a scholar of American politics, Rogin joined John Schaar, Sheldon Wolin, and Hanna Fenichel Pitkin to comprise what is now called “the Berkeley school” of political theory, an approach to theorizing distinguished by its conception of “the political,” attention to language, and commitment to participatory, inclusive democratic practices.

Rogin’s first book, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy* (1967), contested the pluralist theory then dominating American political science which portrayed Senator Joseph McCarthy – and Cold War “McCarthyism” – as the heir of a “populism” conceived as an anti-democratic and irrational instance of a “mass politics” hostile to liberal institutions and values. The crisis and intellectual currents around the Vietnam War motivated his second book, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (1975), a groundbreaking effort to theorize the racializing logic and genocidal practice of what is now called “settler colonialism” in relation to “liberal society,” that is, to a society professing to practice the principles of liberalism. His next book, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (1983), was a generative experiment in what soon was cast as “new historicism”; he subsequently became the only political scientist among literary theorists and historians on the founding editorial board of the new historicism’s main journal, *Representations*. By relating family drama, market institutions, and the political crisis around slavery to the form and content of Herman Melville’s literary art, the monograph underscored how Melville conceived and dramatized the central contradictions in American life.

If the Melville book suggested mediations relating an author to his various milieux and his art, Rogin’s next book, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in American Demonology* (1987), traced those mediations to explain the persona and appeal of Reagan. Reagan’s rise through anti-communist Hollywood purges and California politics taught him the party infighting and the spectacle that enabled him to personify an emergent “New Right” determined to forget what the 1960s insurgencies had remembered. Rogin considered films to be fertile political texts, and his readings of *Birth of a Nation* and of Cold War science fiction movies were incorporated into his Reagan book. *Blackface, White Noise* (1996b), however, provides his most sustained account of racial performativity and masquerade in the formation of American popular culture. As a result, it belongs among the founding texts of what is now called “whiteness studies.” Rogin showed how blackface became the propagative cultural form through which a society fragmented by ethnic immigration, class resentment, and region was reunified by a whiteness forged in performances that posited – and then crossed – a black/white binary. In *Independence Day* (1998) Rogin exposed how “New Hollywood,” often celebrated for its progressive politics, continued to stage supposed multi-ethnic or multicultural unity on violently exclusionary terms. Analyzing the

1996 blockbuster by that title, he showed how the reuniting of “*e pluribus unum*” occurs through an alliance of black and Jewish men made possible by fighting a common enemy, murderous aliens seeking to occupy and exploit Earth. In Rogin’s reading, these invaders stand in for the 1980s preoccupation with undocumented immigrants, while the attack on their “mother ship” stages what are now called “heteronormative” anxieties about the visible emergence of homosexuality.

In his books on Andrew Jackson and Indian removal, Reagan and spectacle, and blackface and national identity formation, Rogin exposed and charted how identity, culture, and even theory itself are constituted through the repudiation of an otherness that they draw on for life. His psychoanalytic orientation probed the unconscious motivation – and the deep structures of race, gender, and sexuality – typically obscured or disavowed by prevailing forms of political theory. Correspondingly, because Rogin followed feminism in connecting rather than separating “the personal” and “the political,” he adapted Ernst Kantorowicz’s theory of “The King’s Two Bodies” (1970) to show how political leaders become symbolic objects who solicit, receive, and negotiate powerful projections. Rogin’s accounts of Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Richard Nixon, and Reagan illuminated the investments and anxieties that rouse national politics and congeal in particular political figures. As his studies of the presidency show, the mediating roles of political institutions are at once symbolic and material, so his other work typically intertwined electoral and party politics, legislative debate and policy, executive and judicial power, rhetorical form and violent practices, not to mention daring theoretical leaps and telling empirical details. At the same time, from his first book on McCarthyism to his last, unfinished book on Hollywood and the cinema of the Popular Front, Rogin’s work addressed the ways in which genuinely radical social movements – especially agrarian populists, the movement to organize industrial labor, and the black freedom insurgency – were defeated, diluted, maligned, or misappropriated. In Rogin’s work, therefore, countersubversive political projects and academic interpretations repeatedly secured elite rule – and demonized democratizing movements – in the name of democracy.

Rogin’s central methodological insight is that “efforts to comprehend the meaning of American politics suffer from a split that echoes the splitting mechanism in countersubversion itself, namely the bifurcation between the symbol and the real” (1987: 272). On the one hand, “realists” among political scientists argued that elites use language instrumentally to secure their economic and political interests, or knowingly misrepresent actuality in order to manipulate mass support, and as a result, realists minimized the psychological appeal and political resonance of symbolic language. On the other hand, “symbolists” addressed “anxiety and unconscious grievances” and analyzed “subcultures and status anxieties” as well as “the fantastic character of the demons” animating American political rhetoric, but “avert[ed] their eyes from the material sources of demonology in genuine social conflicts and deeply opposed world views” (1987: 272). Unlike the realists, Rogin took “seriously the demonological worldview and its latent unconscious meanings,” but unlike the symbolists, he saw “a countersubversive tradition ... at the core of American politics, not its periphery” (1987:

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274). These relations between the symbolic and the institutional were manifested in settler colonialism and anti-communist politics, but also by the very idea of race. For white supremacy over red and black, he argued, undermines any simple distinction between interest and fantasy, because “the fantasies whites generated about people of color exposed and intensified actual conflicts of interest” (1987: 277). Rogin thus synthesized these two approaches in a richly complex theory of politics. On the one hand, symbolic analysis (of the ideological meaning, affective charge, and psychological resonance of political rhetoric) draws on its racial and gendered subtexts and their vernacular idioms. On the other hand, realist analysis embeds an event, act, movement, text, or artifact – Indian genocide, political campaigns, presidencies, McCarthyism, Melville novels, minstrelsy, or Cold War films – in institutionally mediated formal politics, and in its specific context and conditions of production.

Rogin’s dual legacy – from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud – enabled him to theorize the relationship between dimensions of politics often disconnected: institutional power and cultural forms, material interests and symbolic meanings, class projects and identity politics, public and private. But unlike many interpreters of Marx or Freud, Rogin’s work also appreciated political and aesthetic surfaces, both the fantastic play of meaning in cultural expression – rhetorical, literary, or cinematic – and the empirical actuality of specific actors and decision-making in particular settings. In turn, Rogin’s theorizing introduced the role of the visual and the spectacular in politics, not only as filmic representations, but in the manufacture of politics as Hollywood spectacle, a process only intensified as presidential politics is remade now as “reality television.”

Rogin’s analytic approach mediated symbolic forms of representation, their institutional ground, their embodiment in and by creative actors, and their broadly political resonance. His scholarship, though focused on American politics and culture, thereby enriches our capacity to think the political critically and creatively, enlarging our sense of what political theory is and does. Our selection of Rogin’s work in this volume is organized into three categories of substantive innovation: Demonology and Countersubversion; The Psychic Life of Liberal Society; Political Mediation: Institutions and Culture. In the essay concluding this volume, we draw on Rogin’s methodology to theorize our own political moment.

### **Demonology and countersubversion**

These two intersecting concepts comprise Rogin’s most important theoretical innovation, at once a method and a form of critique. Rogin used the terms “countersubversive tradition” and “political demonology” “to call attention to the creation of monsters as a continuing feature of American politics,” which is organized

by the inflation, stigmatization, and dehumanization of political foes. These monsters – the Indian cannibal, the black rapist, the papal whore of Babylon,

the monster-hydra United States Bank, the demon rum, the bomb-throwing anarchist, the many-tentacled Communist conspiracy, the agents of international terrorism – are familiar figures in the dream-life that so often dominates American politics.

(1987: xiii)

Identity is always constituted by positing difference, but if it is idealized, it will be consolidated by demonizing difference as irredeemable otherness. A liberal subject defined by self-determination, and a national subject defined by that sovereignty, will be especially vulnerable to and fearful of the heteronomy it lodges in the body, in others, and in history. In a liberal society, demonology thus articulates political projects of countersubversion to master the impulses, groups, practices, and aspects of reality recurrently defined as non-liberal, and thus as alien and un-American.

While not common terms in political science or theory, many canonical theorists have observed how the process of rendering enemies secures community boundaries and collective identity. Carl Schmitt, for example, defined “the political” as this very “intensification” of the “friend/enemy” distinction, and lamented that “liberalism” denied the necessity and value of this distinctively political practice (1996). Rogin, in effect, inverted Schmitt: the propertied individualism of a “liberal” regime in the nineteenth century, and the interest-group liberal pluralism of the Cold War era, emerged precisely by drawing this charged frontier against purported anti-liberal threats, and their impact was to repress dissent and foreclose political contestation. But Rogin did not just reverse Schmitt in this sense, because he also anchored such rigid distinctions to Melanie Klein’s theory of the “splitting” by which the child separates the mother into a good object and a bad one, loading onto “the bad breast” its own aggression (2002). Dividing the mother into ideal and demonized objects, and the related cleaving of dangerous maternal nurture jeopardizing idealized autonomy, he argued, animates and links the psychic, institutional, cultural, and economic dimensions of the American political imaginary.

Rogin saw how discursive logics generated constitutive exclusions, but he focused on historical and political practices as he narrated the relationship between an imagined (and idealized) national community, and the disavowals that generated charged images of otherness and subversion.

Taken inside, the subversive would obliterate the American; driven outside, the subversive becomes an alien who serves as repository for the disowned, negative American self. The alien preserves American identity against fears of boundary collapse and thereby allows the countersubversive, now split from the subversive, to mirror his foe.

(1987: 284)

The countersubversive is justified in imitating the practices he attributes to the alien, in the name of protecting the freedom (or “way of life”) of an idealized

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America; violence is thus rendered not only legitimate but redemptive. Indeed, “practices attributed to the subversive actually depict countersubversive aspirations; the more powerful the demonology, the more powerfully it speaks, against itself, truths about American politics” (1987: 80). Those truths concern not “the danger from without” but “the wish from within,” which becomes visible as doubling collapses, as torture effaces the civilized–savage binary, as state surveillance undermines the line between freedom and despotism, or as citizens relinquish the autonomy they profess to love.

In identifying this pattern, Rogin also intervened in debates among scholars regarding its source. Whereas Richard Hofstadter had located “the paranoid style” only at the margins of American politics among those displaced by industrialization/modernization, Rogin’s first book on McCarthy depicted demonization as constitutive of elite politics, characterizing not deluded masses but precisely those in whom Hofstadter lodged rationality and pragmatism (1964). Likewise, Rogin’s subsequent work on demonization began with elites and the symbolic politics they were invested in. Still, his scholarship increasingly had to account for the resonance of this symbolic politics, its capacity to reconstitute what Benedict Anderson terms “imagined community,” and to mobilize mass publics in support of specific projects, while simultaneously repressing the political (1991).

Rogin’s first innovation, then, is theorizing this constitutive and repeated dynamic of idealization – splitting, disavowal, and demonization – which spectacular narratives of countersubversion produce in order to protect or even save an ideal(ized) identity and endangered community. Citizens in the midst of such episodes (e.g., the United States during the “global war on terror”) cannot see how their bipartisan consensus, their very commonsense, is a “disturbed ideology,” indeed a form of “derangement,” because of the splitting it presumes and the disassociated violence it enables. Moreover, Rogin argued, demonology depoliticizes because the personal displaces the political. Seeing the world through the symbolism of monsters turns multidimensional historical situations that involve complex antagonists and institutions into simplistic and moralistic melodrama. By stigmatizing the “alien” as “un-American,” demonology also secures norms and delegitimizes dissent. Therefore, countersubversion produces not only political repression of already extant voices and alternatives, but also suppression of the political itself, a pre-political foreclosure of difference and possibility.

Rogin’s “countersubversive demonology” theorizes the making of a formally liberal political regime with a national citizen-subject whose identity is tied to constructions of whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality. By diagnosing the grotesque symbolizations of otherness that brought this subject into being, and continue to haunt it, Rogin’s scholarship enacted an ethical as well as political practice of confronting subjects with their disavowed violence, and the motivations that sustain it. He refused to speak for those being demonized, which would only repeat their erasure in representation. But by looking at liberal society from their perspective his work reversed and exposed the dominant gaze, a kind of

“working-through” that could enable memory and change rather than forgetting and repetition. His original contributions to the study of whiteness and masculinity were driven by this ethical and intellectual project.

### **The psychic life of liberal society**

Rogin is among the few theorists who addressed rather than evaded the essential contradiction in liberalism – how a polity professing equality, liberty, and pluralist toleration engages in genocide, slavery, and imperial war. It was this question that turned Rogin toward psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, and engagement with culture, in order to address the inability of rational-actor models, and of Marxist theory, to explain the symbolism, violence, and disavowal at the center of American history and national identity. Evoking Melville’s account of Captain Ahab’s “monomania,” Louis Hartz depicted American culture as dominated by an “irrational Lockeanism” within which an individualistic and propertied conception of freedom made it impossible to apprehend the reality of sociality, structures of stratification, or the complexities of social change (Hartz 1991: 11). In turn, however, “liberal” subjects repeatedly encounter the return of the repressed in their symbolic objects – savages, whales, states, women, and terrorists – against which they define, prove, and avenge themselves. While rational action models emphasize material interest as a motive (so that Indian policy, for example, is explained simply by self-evident primitive accumulation), Rogin also asked about the meaning of contact with a non-liberal culture to the white men who were attached to liberal principles. Likewise, he explored the symbolic and not only material use of enslaved peoples in the charged representations by which a white, i.e., “American” identity has been formed and lived in popular culture. The psychic life – unconscious meanings, disavowed longings, phobic symbolisms – of liberalism thus appears in its enemies, targets, and symbolic vehicles – as they embody features of human life and social existence devalued by the liberal ideology of autonomy. Moreover, the pervasive investment in individualism both generates and intensifies “the wish to escape from the anxiety of separate identity” (1987: 266), and though this wish must be disclaimed, it will be satisfied by conforming to mandated forms of self-expression, by upholding law and order against chaos, by enjoying tribal comradeship, by submitting to an invasive state (or to a bullying leader) promising to protect us from those who hate our freedom.

Foregrounding the psychic life of liberal society as an innovation emphasizes Rogin’s attention to the vicissitudes and symbolic forms characteristic of a society mandating self-determination as an ideology in Louis Althusser’s sense, that is, as materialized in contradictory, lived practice, including disclaimed presuppositions, unconscious ambivalences, and disavowed entailments (1971). Rogin linked the insights of Alexis de Tocqueville and Hartz about possessive individualism and “mass society” to structural theories emphasizing genocidal dispossession, chattel slavery and its afterlives, industrializing capitalism, and a patriarchal division of labor. Rogin’s “liberal society” thus denoted pervasive

investment not only in individualism across lines of race, class, and gender, but also in its avowed conditions of possibility in Oedipal kinship, Christian self-regulation, property ownership, and racial hierarchy. Whereas Tocqueville and Hartz posited consensus, Rogin paralleled Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams in identifying it as hegemony (Gramsci 1971; Williams 1977). Whereas radical critics traced the presence of communal alternatives to liberal individualism, Rogin studied the communal aspirations internal to liberalism. “Instead ... of seeking a place to stand inside America that is derived from the tradition of English Puritans, European republicans, or Scottish common sense philosophers” – we might add populists and immigrant anarchists to this list – “my ground is the critical analysis of liberalism itself” (1987: 281). He explicitly invoked Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” in order to explore the contradictions in civil society that are both presupposed and disavowed by “abstract and allegorical” figurations of “the democratic state” as the site of universality (1978). But Rogin’s account of civil society linked a Marxian view of class and the market to the generative importance of family, gender, and sexuality. As a result, Rogin could theorize how that “dream-life” of universality entailed demonization.

Rogin thus inverted the “American exceptionalism” paradigm dominant in social science and literary studies until the late 1960s. Liberal society was said to lack the structured class politics and powerful state characterizing European politics, displaying instead a pluralism of voluntary associations and ethnic groups, and a rights-bearing individualism, each enabled by frontier expansion and upward mobility. Rogin invented what he called “negative exceptionalism,” whereby American social science was produced by denying commonalities (of capitalism and patriarchy) with Europe, while occluding how European colonialism had bequeathed the intimately local racial domination that had produced a distinctive history, culture, and politics. American cultural inventions, and American popular culture more broadly, are inconceivable unless we trace their ground in structures of inequality and practices of cultural appropriation.

If liberal individualism is continually justified by symbolizing the regressive, frightening impulses that others are made to embody and that normative citizens must master, this very splitting produces what Rogin calls “destructive racial desire” (1996a: 16). For as popular culture displays, rights-bearing white men also wish to enjoy the sexuality and violence, the license and sensual ease, that they project onto their others. That desire is destructive partly because it remains in the spell of the racial imaginary in which people of color are reduced to merely symbolic objects, and partly because – as a mass culture pervaded by hip-hop demonstrates – white celebration of blackness requires actual black folks to remain subordinated and degraded.

Tocqueville depicted individualism as inherently deranged because it disavows the basic conditions of human sociality; he endorsed “association” partly for the therapeutic purpose of “reminding men that they live in society” (1990). For Rogin, this pervasive dissociation from the fact of social being was also fueled by racial domination and imperial violence, but in addition, he anchored

the psychic life of liberal society – its characteristic projections and disavowals – in the conjugal form of the bourgeois family, and thus in the distinct role of mothers. Claiming that “women occupy a special place in the history of American demonology,” he drew on feminist theory and Klein’s psychoanalysis to argue that theorizing politics in the founding father’s house requires analysis of “an anterior world, that of the pre-Oedipal mother” (1987: 281). While targets are historically specific and variable, “attending to the origins of individual identity helps explain the *structure* of the countersubversive imagination” through splitting of identity, and “the deep *sources* of countersubversive fantasy” in fears of regression and identity-loss (1987: 290–291, emphasis added). Pervasive splitting of the autonomous and masterful from dependence or attachment bespeaks this deep structure and its familial sources. The “surface normality” of liberal society thus legitimizes a disassociation hidden in plain sight.

A political tradition that splits off and demonizes the other convicts itself of psychological disturbance ... This is not to say that all adherents of a countersubversive worldview are ... personally disturbed, but rather that they share a disturbed ideology that functions as a psychological protection. (1987: 285)

Such splitting shields the countersubversive from having to acknowledge the truths of maternal origin and of human vulnerability; politically, it shields the countersubversive from facing the inequality and violence that shadow liberal universality.

### **Political mediation: institutions and culture**

Rogin’s third innovation is a conjoined analysis of the culture of politics and the politics of culture. He argued that cultural forms (narratives and genres, performances, symbolic idioms, media establishments) mediate politics; and that political institutions (such as parties and electoral campaigns, state institutions, social movements and their infrastructures) mediate cultural forms. Through what we term “mediation,” his scholarship showed how political leaders, social movements, cultural institutions, and specific works of literary or visual art “translate personal troubles into public issues,” as C. Wright Mills put it in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959: 174). As forms of mediation, texts, public figures, and collective action can translate experience into opposing political projects, but, also, the very possibility of politics can be enabled or foreclosed.

Rogin’s work on specific cultural artifacts shifted from the literary art of Melville to blackface performances and films that inaugurated and defined modern mass culture. He held that “each transformative moment in the history of American liberalism” – 1840s, 1880s, 1920s, and arguably now – “has founded itself on the surplus symbolic value of blacks,” as whites exercised “the power to make African Americans stand for something other than themselves” (1996b: 14). American cultural studies found in blackface a white working class

expressing ambivalence or resistance toward middle class hegemony, a view typified by Eric Lott's account of "love and theft" (1995); in contrast, Rogin depicted Irish and Jewish immigrants seeking mobility and acceptance through virulent caricature and destructive racial desire. "Minstrelsy accepted ethnic difference only by insisting on racial division." Immigrants claimed their status as American "by differentiating them[selves] from the black Americans through whom they spoke" (1996b: 56). Cultural artifacts and performances thus enacted a political mediation. By a performative identification with and inhabitation of blackness, immigrants and filmmakers worked to surmount ethnic stigma, and, by creating art charged with racial meaning, they succeeded in making a national political culture that symbolically overcame class, ethnic, and regional division. Rogin's theoretical innovation, therefore, was linking specific cultural forms to the remaking of large-scale political life as organized by liberal nationalism. Likewise, Rogin also explored how Hollywood films – Westerns, science fiction, *film noir*, and thrillers – consolidated Cold War mass culture, and justified the invasive surveillance and violence of a national security state. Cultural texts thus performed ideological work to secure domination, but in his view, each artifact still "speaks, against itself, truths about American politics" (1987: 284).

Rogin's engagement with cultural forms paralleled the rise of cultural studies, the work of Raymond Williams and the Birmingham School associated with Stuart Hall, as well as its American iterations, but there are crucial differences (Williams 1958; Hall 2016). On the one hand, his analysis followed Williams's view of culture as denoting both a "form of life" (in an anthropological sense) and its artifacts. Moreover, like Williams and Hall, he used Gramsci's idea of hegemony to depict both the consensual and commonsense aspects of a "liberal" ideology and the assemblage of institutions underwriting it and its coercive foundations. But whereas Hall depicted the ascendancy of Margaret Thatcher by a theory of moral panic, Rogin deepened that idea by a psychoanalytically informed history, which emphasized countersubversive demonology and the impact of the bourgeois family. In his conception, culture (as a form of life and as artifacts) mediated not only commodity fetishism but also the dynamics of gender and sexuality. On the other hand, Rogin's work also paralleled, and yet differed from, emerging forms of cultural studies in the United States. It located politics not in the state and formal politics, or in organized social movements, but primarily in cultural objects created or repurposed by subaltern people, and conceived as sites of political resistance. In contrast, Rogin related cultural artifacts to the state and other powerful political institutions, to national, as well as to electoral, presidential, and formal politics.

Rogin's approach to mediation additionally shaped his accounts of the American Presidency as an institution. The theoretical bridge between his work on Jackson and his analysis of Reagan is the idea that presidential bodies are at once personal and political, mediating personal and national identity for mass publics. In "The King's Two Bodies: Abraham Lincoln, Richard Nixon, and Presidential Self-Sacrifice" Rogin (1979) depicted the American Presidency as the single unifying site in a fragmented political world, the elected office by

which the central issues animating social life are articulated and indeed acted out in terms of a national identity. He thus traced the projection and circulation of symbolic energies whereby the “personal body” of a figure is endowed with collective meaning and becomes a “political body.” A president must claim to *embody* “America” in order to advance institutional interests or policy agendas. As whites symbolically used black bodies to mediate their relationship to liberal ideology, to civic life, and to their own humanity, mass publics make political figures, and especially presidents, figures of projection and transference, while political figures seek support and gain authority by inserting themselves into a script that they do not author but inherit and enact.

The presidential body is thus a constructed and intersubjective object, at once symbolic and political, whose meaning is dramatized and intensely contested. Political effectiveness – and failure – largely depend on this dramatic work of cultural mediation, by which inherited terms of legitimacy are invoked, sometimes revised or even flouted. More like Niccolò Machiavelli than other critical political theorists, Rogin situated political actors – whether Jackson, Lincoln, or Reagan – in a divided social landscape, in relation to autobiographical exigencies, inherited symbolic and narrative forms, formal political institutions and party politics, as well as the contingencies of human life. Attuned to the logic of modern power, though, Rogin also invoked Thomas Hobbes and Tocqueville to argue that this investment of meaning fuels not only an imperial presidency but also a Leviathan state whose expanding power is authorized but not limited by elections.

Like Sheldon Wolin, Rogin narrated the expansion of state power as a danger to democratic participation, an avoidance of the real work of democratizing American society. In this spirit, the other notable example of Rogin’s approach to mediation is his engagement with populism. In academic theory since Hofstadter’s (1964) famous essay on “The Paranoid Style,” populism is typically defined as a form of politics that rejects institutional mediation, as a politics that posits “the people” as a unified subject, in order to oppose elites and constitutional process, and instead seek direct and immediate representation of its purported interests and values. In such arguments populism signifies an authoritarian and plebiscitarian – some now say proto-fascist – politics, and the only alternative is a “liberal” democracy that elevates constitutional process and elite rule in order to diminish the possibility of majoritarian tyranny and the irrational extremism of “mass politics.” According to Wolin this argument was first advanced in *The Federalist Papers*, which criticized participatory forms of “democracy” in order to defend the indirect representation of a “republic” (Madison 1787; Wolin 1989). In the 1950s, political and social scientists reanimated that image of dangerously unmediated democracy when they located McCarthy in a “populist tradition” depicted as nativist, anti-pluralist, anti-intellectual, and “paranoid.” Whereas these liberal critics depicted “the people” as a “mass” mobilized by charismatic demagogues who articulated “status anxiety” as conspiratorial narrative, Rogin’s (1967) *The Intellectuals and McCarthy* used voting and opinion surveys to demonstrate that McCarthy did

not create a social movement, being supported mostly by local elites and loyal Republican Party voters, and that his anti-communist message was amplified by media profiting from scandal. He maintained, therefore, that nineteenth-century populists created a radically democratic social movement, as Lawrence Goodwyn's *The Populist Moment* (1978) later documented. They built an extensive participatory infrastructure and associational network, and remained invested in constitutional reverence while militantly opposing both emerging corporate and party elites claiming to represent them. Still, Rogin argued, their invocations of "the people" did not escape the racial imaginary. Moreover, because "the people" and "the nation" are entwined in the idea of popular sovereignty, national political leaders typically gain office by invoking "the people against the interests," while in fact displacing both the concern for public good and the participatory self-governance that Rogin made the key measures of populism as a democratic project. As he observed, "contemporary 'populism,' unlike the late nineteenth century movement of that name ... serves American power in the name of attacking it" (1998: 40).

To some extent, Rogin's scholarship has been undervalued by varying genres of contemporary theory. Perhaps this is because his use of psychoanalytic theory and focus on national politics put him in tension with their approaches to politics and culture. On the one hand, Rogin's work on minstrelsy prominently featured cross-dressing and masquerade, and used the language of performativity by which Judith Butler created "gender trouble" (1989). But as a student both of Melville's "confidence man" and of minstrelsy, he remained focused on the inequality of power, absence of reciprocity, and violent exclusions that are obscured if identity is theorized only in terms of performance, fluidity, and masquerade. On the other hand, he emphasized how liberal society endorsed institutions like the family, asylum, and prison in order to fashion self-making subjects, just as Michel Foucault depicted disciplinary subjection producing subjects. But whereas Foucault concentrated on "subject-formation," Rogin turned his attention to the masculinity and whiteness produced by race-making and gender-making institutions. Whereas Foucault's bio-political analysis thus emphasized the *function* of race as the sorting mechanism by which sovereignty "makes live and lets die" (2003), Rogin emphasized the *meaning* of blackness in a Puritan culture gripped and fascinated by its other. Moreover, because he looked to mediation, he considered the meaning of Foucault's theory contingent. "Foucault's attack on historicism was liberating in France" because it "confronted a Marxist academic orthodoxy and the paralyzing role of the Communist Party" (1989: 144). But those arguments signify differently in the U.S., Rogin claimed, because the American Left suffered from the absence not the presence of sustained organization, because liberalism in the U.S. is already anti-historical, and because a defense of fluidity and hybridity does not so much open up ossified institutions as echo the dominant ideology of American liberal individualism. Accordingly, Rogin worried that Foucault's ideas, while enormously beneficial with respect to the politics of sexuality, encouraged the Left academy "to lose sight of macropolitics," that is, of state power, while reinforcing the

already potent cultural disposition to “seek personal solutions to political problems” (1989: 146).

Likewise, Rogin’s work could be said to echo key themes developed by the Frankfurt School about culture and capitalism, especially with regard to Hollywood as the central instance of what Theodor Adorno called “the culture industry” (2007). As if to honor Adorno’s critique of reductionism, though, Rogin’s ethnographic view traced the aesthetic distinction, contradictory character, and political resonance of performance and films that might easily be reduced to mere commodities. But while American cultural studies scholars resisted Frankfurt School reductions by attributing to popular culture an unsatisfied desire for equality, Rogin remained highly critical, because he was not invested in giving culture a redemptive meaning for Left politics. Moreover, neither the Frankfurt School nor American cultural studies developed a complex understanding of the relationship between popular culture performances, culture industry products, and political struggles about national politics and the character of the state. From his account of Cold War movies and Reagan to his analysis of the blockbuster film *Independence Day*, Rogin depicted Hollywood and Washington, D.C. as the “twin capitals of the American Empire and seats of its international political economy” (1998: 9).

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**Part I**

**Demonology and  
countersubversion**

