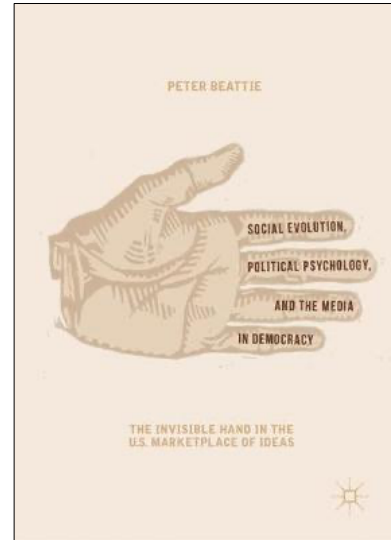


Peter Beattie, **Social Evolution, Political Psychology, and the Media in Democracy: The Invisible Hand in the U.S. Marketplace of Ideas**, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 362 pp., \$89.99 (hardcover), \$69.99 (paperback).

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In **Social Evolution, Political Psychology, and the Media in Democracy: The Invisible Hand in the U.S. Marketplace of Ideas**, Peter Beattie brings to the reader some compelling insights into why democracy, at least as currently represented in the political affairs of the United States, is not functioning well, how news media are implicated, and what may be a way for them to live up to their presumed role as the “fourth estate,” or as the author seems to prefer identifying as the “fourth branch of government.” Moving from the problem to a solution, Beattie draws on variety of material deriving from biological and social evolutionary theory, social psychology, and history, among other disciplines, that is not only informative, but intellectually engaging as well. One could easily see the examination as disjointed, but, in fact, with patience, he or she will come to appreciate the level of coherence the author actually exhibits in his analysis.



Chapter 1 (“Introduction: Why Democracy is Not Working”) has as its essential function laying out the organizational plan of Professor Beattie’s book. He prefaces the overview with a consideration of the enduring question of whether the media have powerful or comparatively weak effects on consumers. It soon becomes abundantly clear, however, that Beattie favors the former perspective and that, ultimately, is central to his subsequent thoughts concerning how to solve the problem of a malfunctioning democracy. As to the overview, however, Beattie’s references to subsequent chapters are confusing at times because he refers to chapter 2 as the first chapter, chapter 3 as the second, and so on.

In “Information: Evolution, Psychology, and Politics” (chapter 2), Beattie draws on biological and social evolutionary theory as the bases for understanding how information as a “thing” develops and the role that news media play in shaping its acquisition, alteration, and use in human behavior. In so doing, he also further clarifies the bases for his view in subsequent parts of the volume that media, mainstream media in particular, can be instrumental in contributing to how democracy in the United States can realize improved prospects for functioning effectively. This chapter, then, provides substantial groundwork for why the author feels that his later suggestions regarding how to make democracy work have credibility, not to mention probable efficacy.

Chapter 3 (“Evolution: How We Got the Minds We Have Today”) furthers the application of biological and social evolutionary theory in accounting for our behavior and, hence, why the two should matter in attempting to account for the failure of the political process of interest (namely, democracy—the U.S. brand)

and the means by which the media of interest (ones that qualify as “mainstream”) can and should play a constructive role in reversing the heretofore continually deteriorating situation. Specifically, Beattie establishes a reasonably direct tie between biological and social evolution to the liberal/conservative divide, that is, left-leaning versus right-leaning political cultures. In my judgment, he evinces considerable success in developing plausible grounds for the view he espouses. Particularly insightful is his development of the evolution/morality/politics nexus.

The focus of chapter 4 (“When Our Evolved Minds Go Wrong: Social Psychological Biases”) takes the reader into the realm of cognitive biases stemming from the evolutionary predispositions resulting from the processes Professor Beattie introduces in chapter 3 and subsequently classifies under the following general headings: System 1 vs. System 2 Thinking, Confirmation Bias, Dissonance Reduction, Meaning Maintenance, Groupishness, Belief Persistence (or Memory Bias), System Justification, Attitude Inoculation and Counterintuitive Effects, Moral Rationalization and Conflict, Self-Deception, and Styles of Thought. This chapter provides an excellent overview of judgmental errors frequently lying at the base of poor decision making, ineffective problem solving, and irrational actions that many of those in various social sciences have been studying for quite some time, but not specifically within the context of political processes or linked to the role of information as supplied by the various mainstream media systems to which consumers have access. That particular context is the primary arena that Beattie addresses in the remaining four chapters of his book.

Chapter 5 (“The Transition: Information from Media to Mind”) begins with an examination of how proponents of the “powerful” and “limited” perspectives on media effects differ in what they portray as the consequences of exposure to the types and impact of the information media disseminate. Of particular interest are the perceived relative impact of media in respect to such variables as perceptions, thinking, beliefs, attitudes, values, motivations and actions. Other effects of interest in respect to the impact of media exposure that Beattie explores are priming, framing, agenda setting, tendencies toward self-segregation, and consumers’ levels of acquired knowledge, as well as its uses. The largely expository nature of the material that Beattie reviews in chapter 5 obscures, for the most part, what seems later in the volume to be his principal concern—namely, that there is a substantial need for mainstream media to do a better job of enabling democracy to thrive rather than perpetuating movement along the downward trajectory it has increasingly exhibited in the recent past via a resurrection of the view of media as providing a useful venue or marketplace of ideas. As Beattie puts it, “The commercial media, constrained by many of the political economic factors that govern and limit politicians, staggeringly fails [sic] to disseminate the needed information” (p. 202) to address our “greatest problems.”

Beattie continues along expository lines in chapter 6 (“The Supply Side: What Affects the Supply of Information Provided by the Media”) in addressing the shortcomings (general failure, if you will) he notes in chapter 5 as to the dissemination of information requisite for democracy to function as originally intended in the founding of the republic. Among the subjects he discusses are: (1) the history of the press and broadcast media; (2) accuracy, or the lack of it, in the characterization news media as the “fourth branch of government” and “marketplace of ideas”; (3) the evolution of such media as currently constituting an oligopoly; (4) the economic crisis in journalism; neoclassicism; media bias and the reasons behind it; (5) filters that largely determine what passes for “information”; and (6) censorship. From Beattie’s vantage

point, these factors have converged over time in such a manner as “to keep the public sphere tethered to the status quo” (p. 259). This set of conditions, in turn, has had an impact on what consumers appear to demand of mainstream media, which appears to be not much in terms of what a genuine, adequately functioning democracy would seem to require. That is the emphasis of the ensuing chapter.

In “Comparing Media Systems: What a Difference Supply Makes” (chapter 7), Beattie addresses the question of what democracy on the level to which the United States ostensibly aspires, and even falsely proclaims having realized in many instances, needs. His answer is relatively simple and reduces to: “full political information and pluralism” (p. 299). Realization of these conditions, however, is a different matter because a media system that fills such needs “is in economic terms an *externality* of media companies’ operations and goes beyond and sometimes against these companies’ rational, profit maximizing considerations” (p. 299).

In chapter 8 (“Conclusion: The Invisible Hand and the Ecology of Information”), Beattie grapples with how to achieve fulfillment of the two requirements noted from a Smithsonian perspective concerning the value of a free marketplace of ideas. In so doing, he develops the “outline of an ideal media system” (p. 334). The proposal calls for the instantiation of an actual formal, independent fourth branch of government—one that the author refers to as the “Democratic Media Commission” (DMC; p. 337). This he thinks might most suitably emerge as a transformation of the currently constituted Federal Communications Commission. Professor Beattie’s discussion of the role of the entity, as well as its establishment, structure, functions, and responsibilities, is too detailed to reconstruct in this relatively brief review. Suffice it to say that he has done his homework not only in explaining how it would operate, but in respect to likely objections in some quarters as well.

The logic underlying Professor Beattie’s sketch of the media system he envisions is predicated on a view of media as powerful. In the discussion, he emphasizes a need to shift the priorities away from current emphasis on commercialism to providing the information that is useful in consumers’ making better judgments in those domains critical to the successful functions of a democracy. If the media of interest are not powerful, then what Beattie is proposing would be little more than cosmetic at best and at worst destructive of any realistic prospects for the survival of democracy as we would like not only to think of it, but have it actually become. An entity such as the DMC could be instrumental in transforming the current media system from one misguided in its values and emphases to one facilitating long-term survival of democracy in the United States, but only under circumstances in which the information it supplies is consistent with and promotive of genuinely democratic values. The restriction is of considerable importance if the system Beattie envisions is to operate as intended.

Professor Beattie begins his book with the quotation of a question Michel de Montaigne originally posed in the 16th century: “What kind of truth is this which is true on one side a mountain and false on the other?” (p. 1). Beattie’s premise throughout is that although none of us can know the truth beyond all doubt, the conclusions we draw from information likelier are reflective of it when exposure satisfies the criteria of extensiveness and diversity. He makes an excellent case as to why this perspective is necessary if democracy is to serve its intended functions well.

One cannot help but be impressed with the extensiveness of Beattie's knowledge and command of the diverse information he has assembled and uses in addressing the dual questions of why democracy, at least in the context of political process in the United States, is "broken" and what avenues are open for its ultimate repair. The consistently careful manner in which he documents his claims is equally impressive. He asks much of the reader but gives much in return. Few readers, I suspect, will feel comfortable with all of the information on which Professor Beattie draws in connecting evolution theory, social evolution, psychology, economics, media studies, history, and political theory to malfunctions in the current U.S. version of democracy and what measures are most likely to have restorative value. On the other hand, his treatment of the problem and its possible resolution should prove to be illuminating.