# Critical Dialogue

— Amy L. Atchison, *Valparaiso University*
amy.atchison@valpo.edu
— Shauna L. Shames, *Rutgers University Camden*
Shauna.shames@rutgers.edu

In this post-truth era, our traditional understandings of politics have repeatedly failed to anticipate or explain major shifts in the political landscape. In two of the larger examples of this trend, pundits and scholars alike recently failed to adequately interpret the mood of a large part of both the British and US publics. Indeed, many conventional political observers minimized or dismissed the likelihood of seismic shifts such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. Into this breach steps Stephen Benedict Dyson's *Imagining Politics: Interpretations in Political Science and Political Television*, which serves as an attempt to account for these failures of political imagination.

Interpretation is at the core of Dyson's contentions about the congruence between theories of political science and the fictional portrayal of politics on television. Both political scientists and TV producers, he argues, offer *interpretations* of politics, and both have spent decades interpreting politics as an insider's game played mostly by power-seeking elites. Dyson notes that while the goal of political scientists is to explain and the goal of TV producers is to entertain, both have promulgated an image of politicians as rational, self-interested actors; he then asks that we evaluate both political science and political TV by asking how useful that image is to our understanding of (and connection to) the political world.

Dyson intends for *Imagining Politics* to be read as an argument about interpreting contemporary politics, demonstrating how what we see on television and what we read in political science both contribute to our image of politics. But he also intends it to be read as a serious method of examining social science theory, noting that "political fictions and political science speak of and speak to the historical and cultural moment that produces them. They reflect and shape the beliefs and anxieties of their time and place" (p. 4), ultimately telling stories about our political processes and leaders.

Likening the scientific-rational understanding that underlies most US political science to the drama-driven approach demanded by the entertainment industry may raise eyebrows in mainstream political science. Dyson's point is not that the scientific method is irrelevant or that scientific-rational assumptions are off-base; he embraces behavioralist research throughout the book. Instead, his point is one that feminists and other critical scholars have made for decades: "the scientific-rational approach of US political science is an interpretation rather than a scientific truth" (p. 4). It is interpretation because we political scientists, like all scientists, base our research not just on facts and observations, but also on assumptions and intuitive, logical, and even creative leaps. From these facts, observations, assumptions, and leaps, we craft models of politics, a process Dyson regards as homologous to the creation of fictionalized political storylines and characters that are portrayed on TV: the functions of political science and political TV—explanation versus entertainment—are different, yet the creative process of developing the models is similar.

Dyson illustrates his argument by pairing political science works and real-world politicians/events with corresponding fictional portrayals of politics and politicians. The first half of the book tackles US politics; for example, matching Arthur Schlesinger's ambition theory with Robert Caro's depiction of LBJ and with Kevin Spacey's portrayal of Frank Underwood in Netflix's *House of Cards*. In the second half, Dyson moves into comparative politics, using the 1980s British television satire, *Yes Minister*, to illustrate theories of public choice. His analyses, weaving together themes from both political science and television, interrogate many of the formative narratives in the discipline and do so in a highly imaginative and convincing way. By taking seriously what television can tell us about politics, Dyson gives us considerable insight into how the public may have arrived at some of its conclusions about politics. His is a particularly useful approach at a time when politics often seems surreal.

That said, *Imagining Politics* leaves us with two lingering questions about the generalizability and scope of its assertions. First, Dyson contends that both television and political science affect how we imagine politics: he notes that television and political theories have built a "web of

meaning" (p. 3), implying that both affect our shared understanding of the political world. However, political theories are rarely read outside the political science sub-fields to which they belong, and on the television front, most of the shows Dyson discusses had (or have) relatively small viewing audiences. For example, *The West Wing* was not a blockbuster in the United States, and although *Yes Minister* was a big hit in the United Kingdom, watchers of British television represent a comparatively small viewing audience. Moreover, gone are the days when people had only a handful of TV channels (as in the 1980s, the heyday of *Yes Minister*): today the public's viewing options have never been more varied. When we consider that some of the featured shows Dyson discusses were available only via streaming services (*House of Cards)* or on premium cable channels (*Veep),* the picture that emerges is one of an increasingly fragmented viewing audience. Our point is not that we think Dyson is wrong; it is that, as viewing audiences become more fragmented, the space for common understandings created by TV continues to shrink. How, then, does his argument shift as the viewing landscape changes?

Second, and relatedly, in Dyson's interpretation both political science and television "imagine politics to be about self-interested elites pursuing and using power" (p. 2). This is relatively accurate in the cases he presents, but is it accurate more generally? Does academically minded Elizabeth McCord from *Madame Secretary* fit the utility-maximizer mold? What about do-gooder Leslie Knope from *Parks & Rec*? Unfortunately, Dyson has not situated his cases in a larger fictional context: there is no analysis of a universe of politically themed shows to tell us the percentage of shows (or characters) that fit the self-interested/power-hungry/elite descriptor. Such analyses would help overcome our "fragmented viewing audience" critique. If it were the case that viewers get the same message from most of TV's political fiction, Dyson could demonstrate that the programs he highlights are representative of the field. In that case, viewers need not watch the shows he highlights to get the idea that politicians are all self-interested rational actors: instead they can watch almost any show in the genre and receive the same shared image. But since he does not take the step of constructing the universe of available politically themed TV shows, we cannot be sure how representative his sample is.

None of the foregoing detracts from the contributions *Imagining Politics* makes or the considerable value it will bring to political science classrooms. Indeed, it provides an exciting approach to demonstrating political concepts. Television's dramatic imperative demands bold action; storylines are often vivid depictions of concepts that can be difficult to illustrate in the classroom. We can discuss utility maximization taken to extremes when Frank Underwood's pursuit of power leads to a convoluted scheme that requires the murder of a US congressman.

When we attempt to explain coalition government, *Borgen* shows students the maneuvering inherent in government formation while also demonstrating some of the challenges of anticipating coalition outcomes. When students are struggling with theories of presidential power, *West Wing* and *House of Cards* can be used to contrast competing views of the presidency. And, as Dyson aptly points out, we can also use these television shows to highlight gaps in political scientists' explanations of political behavior. One example comes from chapter 3, in which Dyson uses Frank Underwood (and LBJ) to point out missing pieces in Schlesinger's ambition theory, such as the role of class (Underwood grew up in poverty) or psychology (how does the driving force behind his ambitions shape the lengths to which he is willing to go?).

Whether professors use individual chapters in introductory courses or the whole book in a politics and pop culture course, students will find engaging writing and well-defined concepts. The two central premises of *Imagining Politics*—fiction can and should be taken seriously, and political science is more than a scientific method of hypothesis testing—are critical foundations of belief that we share with Dyson. In a world in which television personalities have become the leaders of the United States, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Guatemala; an entertainer is at the forefront of Italy's influential Five Star Movement; and actors have governed in multiple subnational arenas, political scientists need new methods of interrogating our understandings of politics—and Dyson gives us an innovative method. Ultimately, *Imagining Politics* provides a compelling analysis of a political era in which truth is at least as strange as fiction, where satirists struggle to come up with headlines that are more extreme than reality, and where facts are optional for many politicians and their followers.

### Response to Amy L. Atchison's and Shauna L. Shames's Review of *Imagining Politics: Interpretations in Political Science and Political Television*

— Stephen Benedict Dyson

Atchison and Shames raise several interesting questions from the standpoint of empirical social science. They ask for a large-N survey of the political fiction genre, which would perhaps reveal whether the fictions I discuss are representative of some population. They note that many of the televised fictions the book addresses had comparatively small audiences (though astronomical in comparison to the number of people who read political science research) and thus wonder how influential they could be on political attitudes. They write that the book embraces behavioral research. Empirical social science is not the field on which my book attempts to play, but, as I state in the first chapter,

it is the default mode of storytelling in our discipline. The very reasonable questions raised by my interlocutors do then gratifyingly, if a bit ironically, support the book's thesis about the dominance of this mode of thinking.

Indeed, it is precisely the point of the book that the political television shows and political theories addressed in the first seven chapters had selective appeal. *The West Wing, House of Cards, Scandal, Borgen, Yes, Minister, The Thick of It,* and *Veep* were shows about, by, and for societal elites. Similarly, the book argues, the discipline of political science is composed of a set of theories by and for a bunch of professors. These shows and theories represent inward-looking discourses that, when they occasionally become visible to the great majority of people, paint an unattractive or at least inaccessible picture. Along comes, at the end of the story limned by the book, Donald Trump's *The Apprentice,* with a much larger viewership and a very different story to tell about political authority and material success. So the book operates as a narrative, rather than being composed of a set of atomized case studies, and it searches for the ways that political television constructs politics rather than just illustrates it.

Why not a quantitative survey of all shows about politics? Here I follow Stuart Hall's lead in his seminal 1973 article, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," which responded to the US Surgeon General's quantitative study of the portrayal of violence on television. The Surgeon General's team tallied each instance of violence in TV westerns, then sought to link exposure to bloodshed on TV to violent acts by children in real life. It found little correlation because, as Hall pointed out, the meaning of violence committed by a sheriff or hero against an outlaw was to promote good order and respect for the rules, rather than mindless imitation. Counting and tallying did little to reveal meaning and have not been central to the field of television studies since.

Finally, does *Imagining Politics* "embrace behavioral research"? Yes, as an interesting and extremely useful set of stories, but not on its own ontological and epistemological terms. I am glad that Atchison and Shames highlight this, because it was my intention to engage with research in the mainstream, rather than dismiss it out of hand as is the norm in critical circles. Will behavioralist scholars thus feel embraced by the book and embrace it in turn? One can hope.

**Survive and Resist: The Definitive Guide to Dystopian Politics**. By Amy L. Atchison and Shauna L. Shames. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 264p. $90.00 cloth, $30.00 paper.
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— Stephen Benedict Dyson, *University of Connecticut*
stephen.dyson@uconn.edu

The tumult in our current politics supplies the impetus for this intriguing and spritely volume, which begins with a stark question: "Are you wondering if your government is inching (or hurtling) toward dystopia?" (p. xi) Writing in the aftermath of the twin shocks of Brexit and Trump, Amy Atchison and Shauna Shames blend popular culture, political theory, and history in pursuit of the production of a "citizens' guide" to surviving and, eventually overthrowing repressive governments, and recognizing those that may be headed in that direction. We might say that the authors are mapping a new field of comparative political nightmares, where the line between the fictional and the real is somewhat blurred.

Whereas it is common to introduce comparative politics by focusing on the concepts and procedures of democracy, Atchison and Shames instead invite the reader to imagine living in a state where the achievement of democracy is a far-off dream (how much imagination this requires in present circumstances may be a matter of some debate.) They elaborate on the characteristic features of authoritarian dystopias via contemporary fictions like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hunger Games*, as well as old standards like *1984*. The book defines dystopia as, essentially, a repressive government that eliminates many personal liberties. In one of their more innovative moves, the authors assign a Freedom House score to the fictional states of the dystopic canon.

In a very effective chapter, Atchison and Shames place economics at the center of the dystopian problematic. Unrestrained capitalism is posited to be a front of repression, with the authors reading Adam Smith's invisible hand theory as a capitalist utopia that inevitably fails and degenerates into an exploitive nightmare. The circa 1980s/'90s subgenre of "capitocratic" fictions, positing a politics dominated by corporate forces, is effectively analyzed. The chapter blends concise intellectual histories of capitalism and communism with a pithy and coherent overview of modern economic history, tracing how different economic periods produce different kinds of political fiction. The intertwined discussion of Marxism, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century economic inequality, and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (the first dystopian movie) is particularly well done.

Atchison and Shames next examine repressive government from the viewpoint of the oppressor and the oppressed. The strategies and tactics of dystopian government—eliminate the opposition, impose a panopticon-like level of citizen surveillance, use force liberally—are elaborated. Not discussing another tactic—the creation of a false reality wherein the state is infallible and morally unimpeachable—represents a missed opportunity. Real-world repressive regimes use powerful fictions to create this false consciousness, and an examination of these fictions—the utopian myths pedaled by dystopian governments—would have added an extra layer of complexity to the fiction/real-life dialectic.

In their examination of strategies of individual resistance, Atchison and Shames puncture the Hollywood

narrative of a hero figure making all the difference by pointing out that successful real-world resistance is collective, slow, and the result of careful planning. Finding a hero should not be the goal of the resistance, they argue. Solving the collective action problem is a far more pressing task. They further note that, even though violent resistance makes for good fiction, nonviolent resistance is much more effective in the real world.

While the authors give short shrift to the role of prominent individuals in resisting authoritarianism, they could perhaps have given greater consideration to the role of the authoritarian leader themselves. Can fiction help us resolve the question of whether the strongman is a symptom or cause of democratic decay and authoritarian consolidation? These are counterfactual matters in the real world—whither post-1999 Russian politics absent the particular skill set of Vladimir Putin, or US politics without the surprise Trump victory in 2016?—that seem particularly ripe for analysis via the tools of fiction, with its explorations of the road-not-taken. In *1984*, of course, Big Brother was likely a fictitious regime symbol rather than a real person. Yet in other authoritarian nightmares of both reality and imagination, quite a lot rides on the particular pathologies of the dictator and the projection of his or her psychology onto the political system.

A poignant final chapter represents a paean to democratic moderation. Democracy is slow and messy, the authors concede, but it is the best cure for dystopia. This chapter is a how-to guide for a successful resistance faced with the task of building a new polity. The basics of constitution writing, institutional design, and fostering an effective political party system are presented. Democracy is fragile, the authors caution, and authoritarian backsliding is a constant danger.

*Survive and Resist* is a subversive take on the comparative politics genre. It reminds us how fortunate are those who live in stable democracies and that the institutions of democracy need constant tending. The fear that populism and the toxic effects of social media are undermining the stability of many advanced democracies pervades the book. This is much more than a clever way to interest the general reader in political science concepts: it is a call to action. "Pick an institution and defend it," Atchison and Shames exhort the reader. "Don't talk about attacks on 'our institutions' unless you're making them yours by acting on their behalf. Follow the courts or the media, or even a single newspaper, and speak up on its behalf" (p. 212).

*Survive and Resist* is effective in exploring one way in which fiction can productively dialogue with real-world politics—by way of analogy from one realm (fiction) to another (the real world). Another important way this relationship can work is through ideation, where fiction is tapped as an insight into how a society is thinking about itself, expressing its hopes and fears and circulating its values. Another way is critique, where the fictional world, initially unfamiliar to the reader, gradually reveals itself as the manifestation of problems and injustices in the reader's empirical reality, thus opening up a range of possibilities for change.

The book aims at, and achieves, the analogical goal, but leaves the intriguing possibilities of ideation and critique largely unexplored. Brexit and Trump prompted the authors to write this book, and if the ideation theory is correct, these events also must give rise to some new fictions dealing with the anxieties that liberal society now feels. I thought, while reading this book, of two recent HBO series: *Years and Years,* about near-future Britain, and *Watchmen*, about an alternative reality in present-day America. One would also imagine, if the ideation theory is correct, that it is no accident that so many of our fictional portrayals of politics have shown a dysfunctional system being worked over by a mendacious elite. I wonder whether the authors might argue for more positive portrayals of democratic politics in fiction to accompany their call to defend our real-world institutions. Would the authors agree that some of our cynical political fictions— *House of Cards, Veep, Scandal*—have played a negative role in circulating a pernicious view of political actors? To put it another way, if democracy is a cure for dystopia, should we demand of our popular culture that it at least sometimes portrays democracy working well and not always badly?

Moving to critique, one feels that an implicit yet unarticulated indictment of disciplinary political science itself is lurking between the lines of the text. What role has professional political science played in failing to prevent or even facilitating our present perilous politics, or in leaving us with so few tools to understand it that fictional worlds represent a more reliable guide? If, as the authors argue, Adam Smith's idealized view of capitalism is in fact a classic utopian mirage containing within it the seeds of capitocratic dystopia, what of the idealized views of political behavior represented by the rational choice school? Has methodological individualism led to an atomized politics dominated by ultra-cynical politicians and alienated voters, each of whom are studied by a disinterested and inward-looking discipline posturing about its scientific bona fides? Could a more pluralistic and public-facing discipline, one that embraced the kind of interweaving of fiction and politics elegantly accomplished in this book, have a more positive effect on society?

### Response to Stephen Benedict Dyson's Review of *Survive and Resist: The Definitive Guide to Dystopian Politics*

— Amy L. Atchison
— Shauna L. Shames

It is challenging to respond to such a positive and generous review, and we appreciate Stephen Benedict

Dyson's close engagement with our book. We share with him a firm belief in the power of fiction as both a tool to engage students' interest and as the subject of analysis of serious political science thought. Where we diverge a bit is in how we approach the effects of fiction on people's views about politics. Whereas Dyson rightfully asserts that (some) political fiction reinforces negative perceptions of the political realm, our focus on *dystopian* fiction stems from our belief that these stories promote people's belief in their ability to influence the future. By warning us about the destructive potential of societal trends, dystopian fiction gives us all hope that we can avoid a dystopian future. Of course, unlike Dyson's book, our project uses fiction more as a lens to illustrate key concepts like the panopticon or levels of authoritarianism rather than to make empirical claims.

Dyson suggests that we consider the role of authoritarian leaders themselves, particularly the narratives they weave—and promote as truth—about themselves, their rule, and their success. This is a great point in a lot of ways. Such narratives become a large part of their appeal; they have the power to spin a convincing yarn about past glory and invoke voters' nostalgia for a "return" to a mythologized better time. (Erdoğan's rose-colored rhetoric on Turkey's former greatness, for example, should give us all pause.) After all, as we frequently note in our work, democracy's greatest weakness is voters' susceptibility to embracing would-be tyrants who can tell a good story. But the mythmaking that authoritarian leaders do is different from the works we leverage, which contain purposeful sets of warnings framed by their authors as art. Both types of fiction are political, but their purposes and strategies differ mightily. We think it would be great fun to explore the personas and performativity of dictators, but that was not our project here.

Dyson's closing paragraph in the review brings up some interesting points. Much of what he references is beyond our scope, but his point about methodological limitations in political science mirrors a challenge we had with the political economy chapter that he highlights in his review. It was one of the last things we wrote, and we had a bit of trouble situating it in the book. Most classic dystopian fiction takes an overbearing state as the enemy—but we thought it important to explain that, as the world changes, so do our fears about the future and bad government; rising inequality and environmental degradation linked to capitalism both play a large role in contemporary dystopian fiction. This is where the methodological limitations of a discipline focused on statistical modeling can restrict our understanding of troubling global trends, such as the effects of the expanding power of multinational corporations not just on small/poor states, but also on individuals the world over (a key fear highlighted in current dystopian fiction).