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**Michael Laver**. *Playing Politics: The Nightmare Continues.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. vii + 174 pp. $11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-285321-9.

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Michael Laver (Trinity College, Dublin) is the author of a number of important works in rational choice or public choice theory, including *Private Desires, Political Action*, [1] *Making and Breaking Governments*, [2] and the delightful little gem *The Politics of Private Desires: The Guide to the Politics of Rational Choice.* [3] *Playing Politics* is the second edition of a work originally published in 1979, but he assures us that, while a few games are from the earlier edition, they have been "developed" and modified in light of twenty years of "practical" experience. Laver has rigorously "field tested" and "certified" the games under a variety of conditions including nationality–England, Ireland, Finland, the Netherlands, and the U.S.A.–gender, age, number of participants, and varying levels of incentive to play. In the case of the participants, he suggests using enemies to play, but, if unavailable, friends will have to do. Academics have, of course, the advantage of a captive audience "at their mercy for apparently interminable periods of time, and can subject these to many different types of cruel and unusual punishment (p. 2)." The book describes in some detail a potpourri of political games and suggests countless clever variations on each.

Laver believes that games can instruct us about some of the intricacies of political life as we bargain, deal, set agendas, form coalitions, fight elections, and overthrow governments. The subject matter of the games is not, he argues, the "great issues" of the moment, but rather "getting your own way" in a variety of game situations (p. 1). For the spoil sport who intones that politics is serious business and cannot be captured in the virtual world of a game, Laver grants a modicum of truth to the criticism, but argues that games are politically instructive and, more importantly, they are fun.

In a world of Nintendo and Hollywood movies with special effects budgets of over a $100 million dollars, there is a marvelous simplicity in the materials–playing cards, money, and homemade boards–that are used in these political games. The heart of the games are the rules deliciously devised by Laver that structure human interaction in this virtual world. To heighten the fun and "reality," Laver partly nods to the modern era and suggests various "embellishments" such as lighting, liquor, costumes, and a sound track with a vast assortment of records. While I applaud his adherence to the golden rule of gaming–let the rules define the game rather than pyrotechnics–in a culture dulled by television and computer games, I would have loved a CD-Rom or video of Laver and his merry men playing several games in varying situations. Laver comes across as a clever host. However, I suspect most of us would be less effective and require some instruction as we play the part of GOD [Game Overall Director].

The games range from the struggle to survive in a political environment to the more complicated nuances of committee and team bargaining and, finally, coalition games that echo the politics and conflicts of nation states. Laver offers three cuts or variations in his description of each game. In the first, he sets out the rudiments of the game and a general account of what is going on. One of the secrets of gaming, he argues, is to allow the players to probe the nuances and tricks of the game without an extensive discussion of the rules. Gaming is, for Laver, analogous to performance art. On the second go round, he elaborates further on some of the strategies that have emerged in the playing of the games in the past. In the final variation, he provides some reflections on the links between the games and the real world.

While Laver believes that politics and games overlap at many points and that we can learn a good deal about strategy and human interaction in the playing of these games, he won't play the "spoil sport" and analyze and dissect the "meaning" and relevance of the game in any detail: "I regard games as a quite distinct medium, even an art form, that cannot be reduced to anything else. I'd rather read books than literary criticism; I'd rather look at art than read art critics (p. 19)." His reason for playing games seems to reflect more the novelist's eye for

character and motivation than the logician and rational choice theorist: "My firm feeling, however, is that the most important job for games is to give you an *empathy* with certain types of political situation, rather than to *explain* them or to lay them bare in any kind of systematic manner" (p. 59, emphasis added).

With the above cautionary remarks in mind, I'll describe the rudiments of several of the games. In "Elections," the participants run a campaign, engage in polling, adjust their party positions, and garner funds for campaign advertising. The outcome turns on the match between the opinion polls and the parties' positions. Campaign funds are then distributed and another election campaign begins immediately. As Fiorina[4] and Mayhew [5] have told us, the end goal in politics is driven more by processor re-election outcome than substantive policy decisions. In the game of "Coalitions," in contrast, the outcome is controlling. The participants, who are "[g]angs of marauding politicians [who] have banded together into political parties" (p. 83), bargain over getting into government and setting public policy. GOD gives each party a war chest of $200,000. With a combination of initial election expenses, card dealing and the luck of the draw, the parties engage in coalition building and decide how to divvy up the contents of the (money) Trough. Each coalition presents its proposal to GOD and, depending on the number of the seats controlled by the parties, winners and losers are chosen. If this all sounds a trifle confusing, it is, but that seems to be part of the beauty of the game.

Is the life of the game adaptable to an institutional setting enveloped in lines of authority such as a monastery, mental institution, or classroom? Several of the games seem problematic as instructional tools. For example, "Coalition Soccer" requires "a three-sided soccer pitch, a soccer ball, a whistle, and a referee who knows something about soccer" (p. 140). The majority of games, however, are less challenging in space requirements. Most will take an hour to an hour and a half to play and can probably be adjusted to the 50- or 75-minute time constraint of the classroom. The more challenging question for an instructor is the seeming loss of control of subject matter, timing, and direction. The games have their own logic and momentum, and they never end at the same point. It requires a certain nimbleness to adjust goals and objectives as they unfold in the midst of playing: Ah yes those were exactly the results I had in mind. The rewards are many, however, and Laver is quite right that "There are things you learn playing games that you can't learn any other way, and that you just can't explain in words (p. 19)."

I don't mean to sound like a prude, or worse yet a victim of the "arrant pomposity for which we academics are so well known and loved" (p. 19), but the side of human character that is often displayed in these games is rather depressing. Laver wants us to feel the tingle and discomfort of being double-crossed by a friend. After the last few months of Starr, Lewinsky and Clinton, I'm a little hesitant to further fuel the fires of political mistrust on this side of the Atlantic. He allows that "[t]hese games probably do present politics as a rather cynical process and politicians as rather cynical people (p. 1)." But since the book is not about the "great issues" of politics, the cynicism, he contends, is somehow muted. But, if the games mimic running for office, agenda setting, overthrowing governments, coalition formation, then where exactly do the "great issues" come in? On the other hand, the level of public debate in American politics over the past ten months has been so depressing that a clean double-cross–bring on the knives–would have a certain purity and appeal about it.

Michael Laver offers a diverse spectrum of political games that can enliven a party, classroom or, perhaps best of all, a department meeting. "Primitive Games" should do quite nicely in place of a workshop on General Education or sexual harassment for next Wednesday's blood letting/department meeting.

Notes

[1]. London: Sage Publications, 1997.

[2]. With Ken Shepsle. New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[3]. New York: Penguin, 1981.

[4]. Morris Fiorina. *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).

[5]. David Mayhew. *Congress the Electoral Connection* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

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