

Global Friday Presents

“Human Nature in Action”: Harold Lasswell, NBC Radio, and the Psychotherapy Program for the American Masses

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In 1939 and 1940, the renowned American political scientist Harold Lasswell wrote and hosted over forty episodes of a radio show, Human Nature in Action, for the National Broadcasting Corporation. According to Lasswell and NBC, HNA was intended to prevent unrest in the United States by adjusting listeners to the insecurities of modern life, characterized as it was by economic depression, the spread of illiberal ideologies both domestically and internationally, and the rapid proliferation of new forms of mass communication. If not mitigated, Lasswell feared that Americans' rising anxieties risked spilling over into public life in unpredictable and destructive ways, ranging from individual expressions of sociopathy to revolutionary uprising akin to those recently experienced in Europe. In uncovering the archives of the show, my project not only explains why one of the most famous political scientists of the mid-twentieth century believed the American public needed to be subjected to a program of mass psychotherapy, and why the nation's largest broadcaster agreed to support it. It also invites reconsideration of the ways in which much popular political commentary today – even when it represents diverse ideological perspectives – remains attached to Lasswellian narratives of mental insecurity as incompatible with a “healthy” democratic polity.

When: Friday, March 1 from 12pm to 1:30pm

Where: In person Room 7-152