

# PUBLIC OPINION

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## PREFACE

The discussion of public opinion and of the opinion process offers many difficulties. There is the tangled, matted field of opinion theory. It is a field cluttered with the stumps of the once mighty theoretical particularisms, a field in which a dense underbrush has grown, in which there are confusing brambles of terminological disputation and an infinite thicket of psychological descriptions. It is not to be readily cleared by the beavering tactics of a petty scholarship or by little brush pickers or small, controversial conflagration makers. It calls for a master synthesizer, who, stoutly implemented with tools of original keenness, can cut a clear path to the other side. While awaiting such a man, perhaps we can beaver a little.

For the most part I have used simple, nontechnical terms in this discussion. But not in all cases. At the present time, no one can write on the field of public opinion in terms satisfactory to all his readers. If an author uses simple terms, satisfactory to the general reader, he ignores the pyramid of language hastily thrown up in recent years by the specialist in this field. These special terms are invented ostensibly to provide an exact definitive terminology of non-emotion-arousing words suitable for use among scientists. The absence of most of these terms would provide the basis for an indictment of the author as an outsider, an outlander, a stranger to the code of the jousts. As language is truly a bond of unity, he might be expelled into the outer darkness. On the other hand, if the author bandies about this esoteric jargon too freely, there is no doubt as to where the general reader would willingly consign him. Therefore, I have attempted to use certain of the special terms, developed in recent years, where such words seemed to make for clarity and objectivity. Elsewhere I have eschewed such terms and striven for relative simplicity.

There is one phrase that I would define briefly at this point. Throughout this book I have referred to the "common man." I mean the unintellectual man—unaware of intellectual traditions and the history of thought. As Harvey Fergusson has written, "By the common man I mean the man who is so absorbed in the immediate and personal ends of living that he cannot view his destiny with any intellectual detachment. Such a man is capable of receiving doctrines upon authority and accepting them, but he is typically not capable of making hypotheses on his own account."

I have not approached the subjects of growth of communication, the emergence and organization of propaganda, the control of newspapers, radio and motion pictures, the questions of restriction and censorship, the conscious manipulation of legends, and the like as "problems" or as "menaces." My objective, I hope maintained with some consistency, has been to direct the attention of the student of public opinion to the development of these phenomena as related to other aspects of the social process. To emphasize programs of "reform" in these fields is absurdly to simplify the processes. This is not to say that we have not had occasion to suggest procedures which might be helpful in controlling these processes, but simply to emphasize that such suggestions are not high-lighted and that "problems" are not the central thesis of this volume. I have not thought it necessary or desirable to indicate my own position on all the controversial topics with which we shall deal. I hope that that position is frequently implicit in the method of discussion of the particular item—or that it may be assumed from the underlying viewpoints of this work.

The reader may feel that in several chapters of this volume I have been unnecessarily discursive and that I have strayed from the central topics under discussion. In such instances, it was my purpose to place these topics in their settings. However, I may have been overzealous in describing the terrain at the side of the road.

It is customary, not only in the teaching profession but in popular learning in America, to emphasize two procedures that I have attempted to avoid in this volume. One is to shock, the other to edify. Indeed, these methods are so common that any serious exponent of relatively impartial description of the social process finds himself baffled at times by the persistent demand of his auditors that they be shocked into attention and then led into "the way."

The contemporary writer of a volume that may find some use as a text finds himself embarrassed by the need to indicate his sources and give adequate appreciation to the originators, or at any rate users, of ideas that he has found helpful, while at the same time avoiding a too liberal sprinkling of references and footnotes lest he incur the charge of an absurdly vain pedantry. I have not coyly hidden all footnotes and references at the ends of chapters or at the end of the book, so that the eyes of students might be untroubled and their minds unperturbed by the obtrusion of the mechanics of scholarship. Sources and references are working tools. However, the reference lists for reading on various topics have been placed at the end of the volume. Any student of public opinion has a debt to acknowledge for the bibliographical labors of H. D. Lasswell, R. D. Casey and B. L. Smith in the preparation of their annotated bibliography, *Propaganda and Promotional Activities*; to H. L. Childs for his *A Reference Guide to the Study of Public Opinion*; and to

Kimball Young and R. D. Lawrence for their *Bibliography on Censorship and Propaganda*.

I hope that the experimental studies referred to in various sections of this book will be superseded within a very short time. Speculation on these topics is rife, and experimental data in parts of this field have been presented at an accelerated pace during the past ten years.

I have no apologies to offer for the various stories and anecdotes that are strewn through the pages of this book. I am well aware of the limitations of such material. Stories sometimes distort meanings, divert the attention or unstabilize the judgment by laughter. But they add interest for the reader and sometimes really illustrate. They are painfully objectionable only to the experts in any field.

It is customary for an author to express appreciation and gratitude to his wife for patience and forbearance with his aberrations during periods of intensive writing, or for sympathetic silence while he expounded certain points, or for critical comment, or for typing and clerical assistance. I am indebted to Helen H. Albig on all counts. I am under obligation to my colleague Professor E. T. Hiller for reading Chapters III, XI, XII, XIV and XV; to Professor D. R. Taft for reading Chapters III, XI, XII, XIV, XV and XX; and to Donald Coney, Librarian of the University of Texas, for reading Chapter III. Before my fireside, my colleagues E. A. Ahrens, R. E. Crist, H. F. Underhill and W. G. McAllister listened patiently to the reading of various sections of this volume during the past winter.

WILLIAM ALBIG.

URBANA, ILL.,  
February, 1939.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE NATURE OF PUBLIC OPINION

The discussion of human affairs, of personal relationships and of public issues and actions is persistent in all societies. Such discussion deals with all subjects about which there is information in the group. It is conducted in all groups, among the simple and the sophisticated, the ignorant and the learned, the common man and the expert. Discussion utilizes all the means of communication—speech, gesture, print and picture. The process of discussion is intensified by the appearance of unusual information or occurrences, by controversy and by conflict. It is said that “a happy people have no history.” A people or group in essential agreement have little to discuss except the sporadic individual variations from the norm. In the simple folk societies such is normally the case. In such a situation, knowledge is limited by the common traditions of the folk, the happenings of the immediate area and the occasional infiltration of alien lore. Today, in the great society, the common man has access to a multitudinous and detailed bulk of information. He has that portion of the accumulated learning of his culture to which he is exposed and the news of the day which is purveyed by newspaper and gossip, by pictures and motion pictures, by radio and all other means of communication. During the past generation, this news has expanded enormously, as to both the size of the geographic areas from which it is drawn and the scope and variety of its subject matter. Discussion is greatly intensified.

Upon this mass of information, the common man projects those scales of value with which he has been equipped. Standards limit his discussion to some extent. Certain topics are not discussible in some groups, although in our day everything is discussible somewhere. Where popularly accepted standards can be applied to the various items of information, there need be no discussion, as there is only one value or principle involved. There is no debate, no controversy. Hence, there is no opinion. An opinion is some expression on a controversial point. Opinion is some form of expression (verbal or other behavior); and it deals with the controversial (not with materials considered as proved or generally believed to be true).

In a period of rapidly changing standards, the range of opinion topics rapidly widens as values are less absolute. In the morning's newspaper, the reader comes upon two columns of news and a full page of pictures

dealing with a New York City suicide, who, by vacillating for ten hours on an exposed building ledge, became national news even before he jumped. The reader may express opinions on the ethical justification of suicide, on the mental normality or abnormality of a suicide, on the viciousness of the gaping spectators, on the methods used to dissuade the jumper, and the like. The reader is in the process of developing opinions on this and many other topics in the morning's paper. On innumerable subjects, he is asked to form opinions. Competitive appeals by various interest groups assail, distract and confuse him. He is admonished, persuaded and cajoled. In the thinking of the common man there is much confusion. Villagers, with the codes that were the product of the village, are engulfed in cities, where complex indoctrination confuses those trained to the slow pace of decision in agrarian communities. In the primary group of the family and in intimate association, man functions on the basis of the rules, the traditions of the folk culture and also of procedures developed in his own experience of association. These relations are carried on in a vital consensus in which the loves, hates, fears and sympathies are a common, oft-repeated pattern. He is accustomed to the development of opinions regarding variant behavior and thought.

In many of his secondary-group relationships in modern life, however, neither the patterns of the traditional culture nor his own experience offer sharp, clear-cut ways of life. Yet, under democracy, he is called on to develop opinions and make decisions. His fumbblings in this field, his economic and political ineptitudes, his lack of grasp of essentials, his following of personal phantoms when he should be occupied with abstract realities make the common man a creature for the satirical thrusts of the more informed observer. Modern authoritarian rulers also express distrust of his capacity. As the number of secondary associations in which the average man is involved has increased, the breach has widened. And the mounting disdain of the intellectual is increasingly in evidence. The common man exhibits a preference for the opinion process and decision relating to personal and private problems and issues. He would "win friends and influence people." He would survey the problems of personal relationships and values. This has always been the despair of the political reformer under democracy. As man in the mass has been thrust into situations in which opinions and decisions about economic issues were required of him, the despair of the theorists has frequently been abject. In the rising tide of popular decision many saw the "revolt of the masses." The people were projecting personal and individual values upon the larger scene. Former President A. Lawrence Lowell of Harvard University recently wrote, "Truly the future has less to fear from individual than from cooperative selfishness." Yet that the common man, with guidance and adequate information, can be trained to function

satisfactorily in the realm of public affairs is the premise of democracy. He should be properly trained under democratic education and then turned loose upon the sacred icons. The remainder of this volume will be concerned with the discussion of the opinion process in large publics. We shall note at least some of the elements involved in that process, thus indicating some of the resources and liabilities of large publics for realistic decisions.

### THE MEANING OF PUBLIC OPINION

There has been little agreement among sociological theorists, political scientists and social psychologists on the exact meaning of "public opinion." The term has been loosely used, sometimes in reference to widespread beliefs, "climate of opinion," consensus, the mores and the more settled convictions of a group; at times, to the process of developing opinions, as distinguished from the product; elsewhere, to statements which are the result of a reasoned, logical process as contrasted with those which have been arrived at by illogical means; and the like. We shall not attempt a historical résumé of the various meanings that commentators of differing schools of thought and of different periods have ascribed to this term.<sup>1</sup> Let us consider merely a few of the more important recent distinctions and definitions.

Our position is that opinion is any expression on a controversial topic. Public opinion results from the interaction of persons upon one another in any type of group. The opinion process occurs in groups varying in size from two to the largest number ever responding to common stimuli on a controversial issue. Publics are simply large groups. At any time there may be a prevailing or dominant view existing in a group, but there are also any number of other opinions maintained by the members of that

<sup>1</sup> In spite of the widespread use of the term "public opinion" during the past two centuries, there is surprisingly little analytic writing concerning its meaning, its constituent elements and the opinion process. For outstanding discussions in different periods, see: Mackinnon, W., *On the Rise, Progress, and Present State of Public Opinion in Great Britain*, Saunders and Otley, London, 1828; Bagehot, W., *Physics and Politics*, Chap. 5, 1872; Thompson, G. C., *Public Opinion and Lord Beaconsfield*, vol. I, pp. 29-40, 1886; Tarde, G., *L'Opinion et la foule*, 1901; Dicey, A. V., *Law and Public Opinion in England*, 1905; Bryce, J., *The American Commonwealth*, vol. II, pp. 261-403, 1889; Cooley, C. H., *Social Organization*, Chaps. 12, 13, 34, 1909, *Social Process*, Chap. 31, 1918; Lowell, A. L., *Public Opinion and Popular Government*, 1913, *Public Opinion in War and Peace*, 1923; King, C. L., *Public Opinion as Viewed by Eminent Political Theorists*, University of Pennsylvania Lectures, 1916; Lippmann, W., *Public Opinion*, 1922; Dewey, J., *The Public and Its Problems*, 1927; Carr, L. J., in Cooley, Angell and Carr, *Introductory Sociology*, Chaps. 22, 23, 24, 1933; Harris Foundation Lectures, *Public Opinion and World Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 1933; Wilson, F. G., *The Elements of Modern Politics*, Chaps. 10, 11, 1936; Bauer, W., "Public Opinion," *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 12: 669-674.

group. There may or may not be a majority expressing a common opinion. The opinion process is the interaction occurring within a group on a controversial issue. The group opinion is the product of that interaction, the resultant expression including all the positions maintained by members of the group. This group opinion is not static but is in flux as new elements are introduced into the discussion. The opinion process in the group may be a reasoned, logical analysis and procedure. In large groups it is more often involved in sentiment, emotion, casual impressions and various illogical elements. Let us amplify these statements.

Opinion is expressed through some of the means of communication. On the basis of the expressed opinion one may and does assume attitudes, mind-sets, beliefs and other subjective states, but the opinion is expression on a controversial issue. "There can be no such thing as opinion without stating the content of the opinion in language form." The response of individuals to this common stimulating situation may be either verbal or nonverbal. It may, for example, be a grimace, gesture or emotional expression. This reaction, however, must be capable of being readily translated into words, such, for example, as expressions of agreement or approval."<sup>1</sup> The trucking code of a few years ago placed a license fee on all vehicles engaged in paid transportation. A Maine farmer, who also pushed a wheelbarrow from the depot to the post office in his little town, objected to this tax. What did he do? "He didn't evade. He didn't chisel. He didn't grouse much. He went to the authorities, paid his \$3 in three well-worn greenbacks, and took out a trucking license for his wheelbarrow. He may not have known what 'reductio ad absurdum' meant but he knew how to do it. Having fastened his license to his wheelbarrow, and paraded it twice daily before the village, he hit upon a better scheme. His little daughter has a trained rooster. Hitched to a cart, the rooster draws two or three letters daily to a neighbor. My friend tried to take out a rooster license under the Trucking Code."<sup>2</sup> Opinion may achieve expression in any understandable and translatable act. Opinion expression is behavior. But this does not mean that opinions can be adequately described in behavioristic terms. By no means. Any fruitful examination of expression of opinion must relate the opinions to the subjective states out of which the opinions have emerged. "The extreme behaviorist assumes that there is only one way in which physical processes can be studied, namely through outward action. Now an object that is immediately presented may produce outward activity without either understanding or belief."<sup>3</sup> If ten people say that they do not like Italians, that is an expression of opinion. We may record that

<sup>1</sup> Allport, F. H., "Toward a Science of Public Opinion," *Pub. Opin. Quar.*, 1: 1: 14.

<sup>2</sup> Canham, E. D., in the *Chris. Sci. Mon.*, July 11, 1934.

<sup>3</sup> Eaton, R. M., *Symbolism and Truth*, p. 25, 1925.

expression on any type of detailed test that has been created. But the reasons for that dislike may be so varied and diverse that in a changing situation one of those individuals may change his opinion statement within an hour, whereas another holds to his position for a lifetime. The record of opinion statements is a record of behavior, but that is simply a starting point for the description of the opinion process. To proclaim, as does the behaviorist, that he is concerned only with overt verbal behavior in this field is to depart very far from science, which is the description of reality.

An opinion is an expression about a controversial point. "An opinion may be defined as the acceptance of one among two or more inconsistent views which are capable of being accepted by a rational mind as true."<sup>1</sup> It may thus be distinguished from a demonstration or proof. There are certain relations, though fewer than commonly supposed, that are generally accepted as proved. A child may give a unique answer to the problem of three times three. But his answer is in error; it is not an opinion. It is variation from established truth. Now, of course, almost all our knowledge is relative, but that residue which is generally accepted at any given time is not the subject of opinion. In addition to the generally accepted demonstrations and proofs, there are those propositions which, within the limits of any group, are accepted as unquestionable. These, too, are not the subject of opinion within that group. Opinions emerge at controversial points, when the old, accepted patterns break down, when doubt has risen, when the tenets of any group are questioned. When there is an awareness of discrepancy, the situation is defined, solutions are presented and opinions are formed.

Opinion may be defined as contrasted to the noncontroversial, but what is a *public* opinion? This is a controversial concept. There are many opinions on public opinion. And real issues are involved. What constitutes a public? In sociological speculation, "public" is made synonymous with "group." In all groups there are some controversial issues. Therefore, the opinion process is operative to a greater or less extent in all groups, from a primary group engaged in gossip and discussion to an international organization. The limits of a group are defined in terms of those who participate therein. "In defining the public as those persons who have the right of participation, we have reached, perhaps, a reasonable interpretation. Such a view leaves the problems of the formation and expression of opinion in psychological terms to the further discussion of opinion itself."<sup>2</sup> But what is *the* public opinion? There is no agreement among the theorists on the nature of the public opinion. The Round Table on the Measurement of Opinion of the American Political Science Association, after agreeing that opinion need

<sup>1</sup> Lowell, A. L., *Public Opinion in War and Peace*, p. 12, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

not be the result of rational process, that it need not include an awareness of choice and that it must be sufficiently clear or definite to create a disposition to act upon it under favorable circumstances (all of which are statements on the nature of opinion), state as further and undecided problems, "(1) whether there is or must of necessity be a single public opinion or whether there may be a number of public opinions on a given question; (2) whether opinion is public because of the subject matter to which it relates or of the kind of persons who hold it; (3) what part of the public must concur to make it public opinion; and (4) must there be acquiescence by those who do not agree?"<sup>1</sup> From the viewpoint of public as group, a public opinion is the expression of all those members of a group who are giving attention in any way to a given issue. The public opinion includes the expression of the majority (if there be a majority) and the minority or all the minorities at any given time. If the differences are so great and persistent that the minorities will not acquiesce to function with the majority, then there is no public—there are several publics. Thus Dr. Lowell quite properly points out that the "opinion of a majority is not always public."<sup>2</sup> Publics exist only when the constituent members will function together. In order to have public opinion, "A majority is not enough, and unanimity is not required, but the opinion must be such that while the minority may not share it, they feel bound, by conviction not by fear, to accept it; and if democracy is complete the submission of the minority must be given ungrudgingly."<sup>3</sup>

There is another problem as to the nature of the public opinion, a haunting and confusing subject for the social theorist. F. H. Allport has referred to it as the personification of public opinion, the personification of the public and the "group fallacy" of the public. "Public opinion, according to this fiction, is thought of as some kind of being which dwells in or above the group, and then expresses its view, upon various issues as they arise. The 'voice of public opinion,' or the 'public conscience,' are metaphors of this sort. . . . A related fiction is one in which the notion of a collective, super-organic being is applied not to the opinion process itself, but to the public which holds it. . . . Somewhat less mystical, but equally uncritical, is the usage of those who renounce the idea of a collective entity or group mind, holding that when they say 'the public' they mean individuals; but who, nevertheless, go on employing such phrases as 'the public wants so and so' or 'the country voted dry.'"<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Am. Pol. Sci. Rev.*, 19: 126.

<sup>2</sup> Lowell, A. L., *Public Opinion and Popular Government*, pp. 4-10, 1913.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Allport, *op. cit.*, pp. 7 and 8. For a critical discussion of this problem, see Allport's article and also Lundberg, G. A., "Public Opinion from a Behavioristic Viewpoint," *Am. Jour. Sociol.*, 36: 387-405.

We have here the old problem of the "individual" and "society," which has been recast in myriad forms. The controversy has often become heated conflict, and the intensity of academic jousting has sometimes appeared to be maintained by what seemed suspiciously like a willful misinterpretation of terms and concepts. One form in which the dichotomy has been stressed is that of individual and group opinion. Public opinion, it is maintained, is something more than individual opinions. It is true that there is continuity of habitual ideas, of beliefs and standards. These are brought to bear on each issue as it arises. But the process occurs in individuals. Is not public opinion simply the individual opinions which exist and are expressed after some form of interaction on the issue before that particular public or group? Otherwise, we go into some form of mysticism about group mind, group soul, the collective unconscious of the psychoanalysts, and the like. In the public there is a great body of traditional beliefs, feelings and ideas. There are also habitual customs, practices and various types of behavior. These have continuity as they are incorporated into the responses of successive generations of individuals. They are superindividual only in the sense that the particular individual did not create them.

Great confusion in terms has occurred because "public opinion" has been used by one group of writers as a label for the content of group opinion (that is, the statements of all the members of the group at any given time), whereas another group of writers refers to public opinion as the process of opinion formation.<sup>1</sup> C. H. Cooley wrote, "Public opinion, if we wish to see it as it is, should be regarded as an organic process, and not merely as a state of agreement about some question of the day."<sup>2</sup> Certainly statements of opinion can be understood only in relation to the interaction that preceded the statement, but, as a matter of labels, we shall designate the formation of opinions as "opinion process." But on active issues, individual opinions may change rapidly. There is constant flux. A record of opinion at a given time may be true only momentarily. To make a record by means of opinion tests simply freezes the process. It is as if I could suddenly freeze the water and the fish in a bowl before me. It might be noted that a number of fish had their mouths open in an identical manner. I count and classify mouth positions. All sense measurements inform me that the fishes' mouths are identical. Yet, on return to fluidity, one fish takes a gulp of water, one a gulp of food and two snap at each other's tails. The opinion process is the subject of the bulk of this volume, but most specifically of Chap. XIII on Opinion Change.

<sup>1</sup> Carr, L. J., has stated this issue clearly in "Public Opinion as a Dynamic Concept," *Sociol. Soc. Res.*, 13: 18-30.

<sup>2</sup> Cooley, C. H., *Social Process*, p. 378, 1918.



## BELIEFS AND CONSENSUS

There are relatively stable beliefs which, at any given time, are not involved in the opinion process. A state of agreement following an opinion controversy is a consensus. It is a relatively quiescent period in the flux of social change. Every existing belief has been questioned at some time in the history of a culture. "Every consensus is a won agreement; to realize it as such requires a background of awareness of disagreements from which the harmony has emerged."<sup>1</sup> And, of course, large publics are not commonly aware of the history of their cherished beliefs and so regard them as universally true and self-evident.

A consensus may be achieved within groups widely differing as to size, maturity and the degrees of complexity of their psychological processes. Experts achieve consensus on theories. The history of ideas illustrates the starts and stops of the professional thinker. Publics reach consensus on ethical, political and economic issues. Even large publics may be in substantial agreement. There is then consensus of the type that Montesquieu designated as the *esprit général*, that Rousseau spoke of as the *volonté générale* and that the English theorists called "public will." The ethical consensus which W. G. Sumner labeled the "mores" are states of agreement and are outside the realm of opinion. Among the bulk of the inhabitants of Mississippi, a public opinion on intermarriage between whites and blacks cannot be said to exist. The subject is not discussible; it is part of the mores. The nineteenth-century social theorists quite generally included both the materials on which consensus existed and also the controversial items as part of the general content of public opinion. A. V. Dicey writes of public opinion as a body of convictions and beliefs and prejudices, as well as of what he calls crosscurrents due to controversy. But we may logically distinguish between consensus and opinion. Plato confined opinion to that which is subject to change. Opinions are developed about admittedly controversial topics, whereas, in belief or consensus, "an idea fills the mind to the exclusion of possible alternatives."

In modern life, awareness of other and conflicting beliefs has made for relativism. Certainty has been extensively undermined. The enlargement of communication first brought the variant beliefs, codes and standards to the attention of the professional thinker and then, to some extent, popularized such knowledge. The areas of certainty were narrowed. "In order to show the vanity of all efforts to found rationally an absolute and universal morality, the varieties and contradictions of moral rules actually recognized at various times and in various societies had to be systematically described."<sup>2</sup> At the close of the nineteenth century such

<sup>1</sup> Kallen, H. M., "Consensus," *Ency. Soc. Sci.*, 4: 225.

<sup>2</sup> Znaniecki, F., *The Method of Sociology*, p. 113, 1934.