POLICING OPINIONS: ELITES, SCIENCE AND POPULAR OPINION

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Abstract

Different socio-historical conceptualisations of the emergence of public opinion in the eighteenth century, which have given rise to the works of Habermas about the public sphere, in particular, allow us to think about the actual social referent of the public opinion phenomenon. The classical focus on prerevolutionary, enlightened public opinion and the hypothetical causal effect of the Enlightenment conceal the anthropological invariants of opining as a procedure of sharing differences and individual interests. This "intello-centric" approach reproduces the elitist ideology in this analysis that limits the procedural universality to the pseudo-public sphere of the "true" citizens, although it declares, as a matter of principle, that all citizens ought to participate in government. After having proven the segregating stakes in these processes, the article shows that the concept of public opinion is not reduced to a normative definition — either in the cultivated sense of a rational discussion or in the psycho-sociological sense of an aggregation of individual states of mind — by the community of scholars and politicians. It also refers to the common opinion and the popular form of speech which characterise the "doxastic" community of mutual knowledge that ordinary actors hold, or think they hold, about each other.

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Only isolated individuals can be dominated.
Hannah Arendt

Choosing public opinion as a subject of study inevitably entails pondering its true "nature," but, to say the least, its ontological status is far from garnering a consensus amongst sociologists. For some, "public opinion doesn't exist:" it's only an artefact constructed for the purpose of political legitimation (cf. Bourdieu 1993). For others, public opinion is what polls measure: the result of adding up individual opinions through recording and statistical processing methods (see, e.g., Boudon, Bourricaud, and Girard 1981). Endless disputes pit the "artificialist" sense of public opinion for a sociology of suspicion that denounces it as a collective illusion serving the reproduction of the status quo against its "referentialist" sense for an empirical sociology that considers it a real and quantifiable entity.

In order to get beyond this opposition, we need to reinscribe public opinion in the socio-historical space of the practices, representations, and interests that presided over its emergence in the 18th century, then link it to the process of scientific and political objectification, elaborated in the 19th century and reinforced in the 20th, which made it seem increasingly self-evident. This return to the origins allows us to render the concept and object "public opinion" eminently *problematic*, while avoiding reducing it *a priori* to any one of its senses. Grasping public opinion as the current state of an historic production allows us to expose the social labour of definition and unification that has obscured its successive sedimentations and to deconstruct the "black box" that its largely unquestioned use has allowed to be put in place. From this point of view, Habermas' work on public space makes an essential contribution, less for its historical precision, sometimes criticised, than for the new kind of interrogation and investigation it has given rise to.

For Habermas, it is necessary to elaborate a concept of public opinion that is at once "historically meaningful, . . . normatively meets the requirements of the constitution of a social-welfare state, and . . . is theoretically clear and empirically identifiable" (Habermas 1998, 244). However, let it be said right off, the articulation, which sometimes borders on fusion, between these different levels doesn't make the task easy; one can, in fact, distinguish between at least three different conceptions of public opinion in his work: a *sociologico-descriptive* conception that defines it by its subject (the 18th century bourgeois public), an *ideologico-political* conception that conceives of it as a new legitimating authority whose symbolic power has managed to supplant that of the absolute monarchy, and an *ethico-normative* conception that deems it the only truly democratic procedure for making decisions about the course of collective living via the rational and open weighing of arguments. To the extent that the historians who have examined the invention of public opinion have primarily position themselves with respect to the first two conceptions that we have just mentioned, we will begin by focusing on them.

The Historical Genesis of Public Opinion

According to Habermas, public opinion must be understood in its beginnings as *the public's opinion*, that is, the opinion expressed by private persons who gather in relatively informal civil institutions (salons, coffee houses, curio cabinets [*cabinets de curiosité*]) to discuss the regulation of trade and, above all, art and literature. This public is essentially bourgeois because, even if it encompasses a large part of the urban

aristocracy, unproductive and devoid of any political function, its true social base is made up of *owners* of the means of production. Only they enjoy enough freedom of thought and action to contribute to the regulation of commercial exchanges and the stabilisation of a system of property that contributes, historically, to the development of civil society. But this public is, therefore, also *literary* since it's composed of readers, spectators, and listeners of art who will claim the right to express lay aesthetic judgements without necessarily bending to the expert opinions of the "arbiters of the arts." The increase in literary and artistic spaces and the enlarged access to cultural goods enabled by their growing commercialisation progressively modifies the status of culture, which loses the symbolic function of representation, of staging authority, to become an *object* of discussion and publicly formed judgement. The bourgeois public, symbolically unified by a subversive label, "the Republic of Letters" lays claim to cultural criticism in the name of free thought, thereby contesting the censure of the state Academies' monopolies of interpretation (see Merlin 1994).

The psychological emancipation permitted by the private sphere which, removed from the demands of survival, favours both experiments with affective relations within the nuclear family and introspection through silent incorporation of the printed work in closed spaces is added to economic emancipation that places property-owners above material circumstance and the cultural emancipation that the exchange of ideas ensures them. The intimacy of his rapport with the text predisposes the bourgeois to psychological and moral self-determination whose validity he can later test in face to face comparison with his peers. Thus, for Habermas, the private sphere becomes the place for the unrestrained blossoming of "the feeling of humanity," universalising by definition, that modifies the self-interpretation of private individuals. For, marked by the literary stamp of reflective intimacy, they think of themselves above all under the aegis of the abstract individuality of a natural person as "pure and simple human being." The *ideal* of the public sphere appears as the logical extension of this private sphere: the private salon's egalitarian communication and humanist introspection is extended to literary salons where the public use of reason places the honest man's moral value and his arguments' intrinsic validity above the privileges of his class. The public literary sphere thus opens up a communicative space founded on the impersonality and rationality of argument in order to transcend the particularisms that constitute the rights and privileges of birth.

The Politicisation of the Literary Public Sphere

The political orientation of the public literary sphere, at first implicit because drenched with culture and morality, becomes more and more explicit when it extends its sphere of expertise to "the general" and aspires to debate everything, including public issues. In the name of the enlightened authority of a "court of opinion" that reposes on the necessity of transparency proper to "the Publicity principle," free discussion of art and literature turns into a critique of secrecy, the monopoly of decision-making. and the arbitrariness of State decrees. The transformation of the literary sphere into a politically oriented public sphere is still more accelerated, according to Habermas, by the imbalance between the economic power of the bourgeoisie, productive and holding the greater part of the realm's wealth, and its political impotence due to the fact that it disposes of no institutional means of collective action. Torn between expansion of "a far-reaching network of horizontal economic [and cultural] dependencies," in which it actively participates, and the persistence of "the vertical axis" of political depen-

dencies which prevents it from venturing outside its sole recognised field of expertise, commercial exchange, the bourgeoisie attempts to assert itself as a full-fledged social force (Habermas 1998, 15). Public opinion, the regulated expression of judgements of taste about *Belles Lettres*, then becomes the means for an eminently political action, consisting in denouncing the unjust foundations of the monarchical order.

Public opinion, henceforth conceived as "the enlightened outcome of [common and] public reflection [on the] foundations of the social order," counters the opacity of political exchanges with the transparency of communicative exchanges that is supposed to allow the collectivity to determine, in concert, the reasons that might justify the advent of a new world. (Habermas 1998, 96). Once turned into *action* and, what's more, revolutionary action, public opinion inaugurates the fundamentally modern political project — even if, as Habermas says, it remains unfinished — of the self-institution of society by itself.

Thus, if we follow Habermas, "the public" in "public opinion" constitutes a veritable collective, historically original, actor that has succeeded, in the face of a monarchical and religious order founded on the defence of particular privileges, in imposing its own vision of the world in the name of the general interest. The composition of this collective actor, despite its pretensions of universality, is certainly limited since it extends only to private individuals of bourgeois station. However, in so far as the narrow educated public incessantly refers to a broader, indeed unlimited, public it tends to conceive of itself as the spokesperson for a general humankind that could one day, thanks to education and decent living conditions, accede to the public sphere of enlightened men. Thus, according to Habermas, even if the expansion of the public hits up against the objective social and intellectual limits of illiteracy and poverty, its pretension to universality can't be reduced to a mere ideology in the service of cultivated property-owners' class interest. For, this interest, in so far as it explicitly disregards social hierarchies in favour of general norms, both rational and valid, in principle, for *anyone*, takes on the appearance of universality which makes it coincide objectively with the general interest.

Nonetheless, if the propensity towards universalism contained, essentially, in an enlightened public's humanist ideology might justify the emancipatory potential that Habermas attributes to it, it is no less the case that its basic postulate links public opinion's historical genesis to the existence of a subject, the public, that is to say, a relatively homogeneous group of individuals in terms of their social status and education. This point having been widely challenged by historians, we will now tackle their criticisms, without overlooking the recent revisions that Habermas himself has made to this model.

The Historians' Point of View

Like contemporary sociology, historical research oscillates between an artificialist and a referentialist approach to public opinion. The proponents of a *conceptual* approach understand it as a "political invention," a figure of speech that made it possible for the people excluded from power to claim a network of authority parallel to that of the crown (cf. Baker 1990). On the other side, the followers of a *sociological* approach attribute it to real social practices that Baker suggests classifying in three categories (cf. Baker and Chartier, 1994). According to him, public opinion refers, on the one hand, to *rumours*, to viscious talk, "to the murmurs of daily life" that manifest an "already-

there of public opinion" whose existence didn't depend on being thematised as a juridical and political entity that might oppose the monarchy (Baker, in Baker and Chartier 1994, 12-14). This informal speech is juxtaposed to the *institutional* channels of production of opinion (the Parliament, the Estates General and Provincial Estates, the royal or provincial academies) that experiment with new forms of democratic sociability and a new kind of official discourse (cf. Furet 1981 and Roche 1993). To this, we must also add the *extra-institutional* circulation of opinion by traditional actors, such as parliaments, which reveal, through pamphlets and improperly published remonstrances, the internal stakes of the political system.

From an analytical point of view, the inscription of public opinion in the reality of everyday life, the intelligentsia's forms of sociability, and the emancipatory writings of the cultivated public is in no way mutually exclusive, these three dimensions being perfectly capable of coexisting. On the other hand, from an historical point of view, its inscription in a specific social domain is the stake of struggles between competing social groups that attempt to decide, by mechanisms of mutual exclusion, which of the different potential "publics" has the right to constitute public opinion (Chartier, in Baker and Chartier 1994, 15). The attempt by certain social formations to appropriate and monopolise public opinion, along with the unequal means at their disposal for establishing it as *their* realm of political expression, shows the close interrelationship between social strategies and discursive strategies, social facts and concepts, that the aforementioned approaches aim precisely to separate. Consequently, classifying the different currents which make up, each in their own way, the history of public opinion, seems risky; for the sake of clarity, we will take this path nonetheless, even if it means sacrificing some of the analytical complexity of the cited authors, in order to better highlight the major axes of their investigations, an approach all the more justified in that they themselves have had to adopt it over the years.

From Ideology of the Public to Mentality of the People

A number of historians of the eighteenth century have attacked the idealisation of a single public of great minds who somehow manage to disseminate, via the circulation of the press and contestatory philosophical writings, a liberal and egalitarian ideology in the heart of "a plebeian public sphere" incapable of thinking for itself. This description, even if it excessively caricatures Habermas' model, highlights its direct affiliation with a history of ideas that supports a vertical model of contagion through representations, the narrow circle of the intellectual elite contaminating, by the effectiveness of its writings, the mass of indigents whose new convictions, acquired by revelation in the course of reading or overhearing something, will supposedly be immediately translated into political action.

The characteristic approach of French "New History" refutes this intellectualist conception that revives endless causal imputations ("it's Voltaire's fault, it's Rousseau's fault") that sacrifice sociohistorical complexity to the *a posteriori* intelligibility generally instituted by the retrospective and "intello-centric" gaze of today's historians (see Chartier 1991). For, the analysis of the literary genesis of public opinion, by conferring on it the status of a coherent system of representations that defines *ideologies* and their "vertical" mode of transmission, is far from exhausting all the practices and representations that characterise *mentalities* and their "horizontal" mode of development.

Certainly, swinging between an elitist historiography that denigrates it as a simplified, indeed distorted, derivative of ideology of which it only retains a few

"crumbs," and a populist historiography that consecrates it as the only authentic expression of collective temperaments, the notion of "mentality" has long been a more normative than analytical term (cf. Vovelle, 1990). However, it makes it possible to underline the determinant role that implicit meanings, "common sense," plays in everyone's cognitive economy. Unlike ideologies, which designate disembodied and invariant concepts linked to a small group of individuals interested in their propagation, mentalities designate representations "in action" which take on meaning within the framework of ordinary experience. In this pragmatic sense, mentalities aren't reducible to ideological remnants bastardised by the rough thinking of the common classes; they refer to social practices, forms of communication that mobilise "a savoir-faire," a practical intelligence distinct from, if not incompatible with, the rhetorical art characteristic of the elites (cf. de Certeau 1984). Thus, the notion of mentality allows us to shift the analysis from the circumscribed culture of educated people onto the broader culture of common people, in the anthropological sense of ordinary life, cultural practices, and the symbolic system which gives them meaning. It likewise allows us to move from the peripheral production of cultural goods to "mass production" formed, well before its time, by the proliferation of speech characteristic of oral culture (see Ginzburg 1980a). Far from the pejorative connotations associating it with cultural backwardness, mentality recovers its legitimacy; it even becomes a strategic theoretical concept since it constitutes the "meeting point . . . [between] the individual and the collective, the long term and the everyday, the unconscious and the intentional, the structural and the conjunctural, the marginal and the general" (Le Goff 1985, 169).

Rehabilitating the People-Without-0pinion

Contrary to the traditional historiography obsessed with the kings' gestures and the words of the educated, socio-cultural history proposes to look "in the farmyards and streets, everywhere where ordinary people have changed their world-view," to see what their dreams, prejudices, and practices have been (Darnton 1993, 19). For, as Duby says, if "lower class ideologies" haven't had access to the discursive tools which would have allowed them to formalise their world-view in durable cultural productions, their silence shouldn't be interpreted as "an absence" (cf. Duby 1985). The history of ideas has nonetheless led to just this negationist interpretation, adding retrospective symbolic violence to the political violence which succeeded in musseling them in the past. By inferring the mentality of an entire period based on the opinion of those who had the ability to make their opinions known, it commits a double error. On the one hand, it replaces the logic of appropriation and the second-hand (*l'occasion*), characteristic of popular practices in accordance with the "invention of the everyday" that de Certeau speaks of, with a discursive logic that is fundamentally foreign to it (cf. de Certeau 1984; 1997). On the other hand, it deduces ideas' real influence on the lower classes' opinion directly from their objective dissemination. This double translation arbitrarily privileges educated thought as "generic;" however, the particular, no matter how exemplary, can never reach the collective without mediations (cf. Boureau 1989). In order to avoid these difficulties, the "new historian" starts with the principle that only practices allow us to reliably infer, like "the indexical paradigm" which Ginzburg speaks of, what are the operative beliefs, conscious or not, that are logically associated with them (cf. Ginzburg 1980b). By hypothesising that collective representations are only explanatory when they are translated into acts, it thus gives

itself the means to skirt a "history from above" that makes the error of prejudging *a priori* the influence of enlightened discourses on everyday ways of acting. By the same, it also gives itself the possibility of exploring "from below," the "structured and structuring mediations" that have enabled the progressive transformation of a period's dreams and ideas into a reality principal, and then a revolutionary action (cf. Chartier 1989).

For the historian of mentalities, this notion refers to "mental nebula" whose distribution is sufficiently transversal to go beyond the dichotomies, often homological, that split society in two, whether between the educated public and the uncultured public, innovation and tradition, conscious representations and archaic habits (cf. Le Goff 1985). It replaces the linear and deterministic causality which takes popular culture for the mere receptacle of enlightened culture's exogenous discourses with relations based on reciprocal exchanges which integrates them into the same cultural continuum. Immediately, the logic of exclusion which treated popular culture as the dominated by-product of the dominant high culture or, inversely, as the incommensurable emanation of a completely "other" way of life, becomes a logic of mutual inclusion (cf. Grignon and Passeron 1989). Rather than opposing the public's culture, linked to the dynamic and prospective history of literature, ideas, and taste, to the people's culture, frozen in *a priori* permanent structures like spontaneity, irrationality, and superstition, it becomes a question of analysing the circulation of significations which integrates them into one and the same kind of "mental apparatus."[1] Only this integrative approach allows us to understand how the opinion of "have-nots" could, at a given moment, resonate with the opinion of the "intelligentsia" so as to generate a social and political movement on such a scale.

In this framework, the privileged object of socio-cultural history becomes the cultural circulation that enabled the public opinion that is reflexive and objectivised in specific spaces of enunciation and the one manifested in practices, spontaneous and "unthought," to jointly construct a new political culture. To account for this communication which goes beyond class membership, it is still necessary to explore the content of these so-called "non-public" opinions that the privileging of "true" public opinion has relegated to the shadows of obscurantism and the refuse of history. For the "new history," the reality of the past resides less in the first-hand testimony of authorised opinions than in the "terra incognita of common opinion" revealed by "indirect discourses" reconstituted from sources such as judicial archives and clandestine literature (Ozouf 1974, 295).

The Micro History of Public 0pinion

When analysing popular opinions, one is struck by a form of categorising the public and private that hardly corresponds to the juridical division that Habermas speaks of which governs the bourgeois arena. The practice of *lettres de cachet*, widespread up until 1750, shows that the "people of modest means," contrary to what the grand narrative of people dazzled by the light of reason leads one to believe, are far from being unconditional proponents of the Publicity principle. Requests for *lettres de cachet* imploring the king to arbitrate family conflicts — by imprisoning an irreligious father, a woman of little virtue or an excessively dissipated spouse — plead rather for a politics of secrecy which alone can hide "family disorder" from the eyes of the vast majority (cf. Farge and Foucault 1982). For the common people, unusual justice of the king

allows the guilty parties and their relatives and friends to avoid the opprobrium that goes along with a trial in good and due form. Consequently, contrary to the clear division of private and public that the public of the Enlightenment aims to institute, the mysteries of royal justice are not necessarily what distress the popular imagination. To the contrary, ordinary justice is considered not a system guaranteeing equal application of the law but an institution that's defamatory *because* public. By inflicting on the guilty a spectacular sentence, openly and publicly, it transforms a private scandal into a public scandal that brings dishonour. *Lettres de cachet* are the sole recourse for keeping the secret "in the family." Paradoxically, the private, in fact, remains private even while it is made public at the apex of power, thus testifying to the supremely personalising relation that binds subjects to their sovereign and weaves familial micro-history together with the macro-history of the State. This symbolic alliance, in and through the act of repression, testifies to the paradoxical emotional connection that links the people to its monarch in a mix of quasi-private *closeness* of "subject to subject" that allows a family to share its pain and suffering with him, and of *distance*, the king transforming a private conflict into a problem of public dimensions that only he can resolve.

But if the common people fear publicity, which they associate *a priori* with the mutual surveillance imposed by the unavoidable overcrowding of their quarters, when it affects them, they know how to use it quite well against the private life of the aristocracy (cf. Farge 1992, 252-253). That's what their hearty endorsement of harsh satire of the depraved mores of the court indicates, its success being inversely proportional to that of the great works of the philosophical party (cf. Darnton 1991). If "public curiosity was not a character trait, but an act which brought each and every individual into politics," this initiation into the obscure mechanisms of power seems to pass then not through the big door of the Parliaments or the Councils that harbour the reason of State, but through the small door of the royal palace's alcoves (Farge 1995, 197).

In fact, in the seditious writings that circulate around Paris, it's not the Parliamentary debates or the state of finances that are gibed at but the personal intrigues, the private animosities, the sexual caprices that distract the king from his duties to the nation and bankrupt the public treasury. Moreover, by abandoning the thaumaturgic ritual that consisted of laying hands on the sick or the major religious ceremonies that his adulterous affairs with mistresses of lowly condition prevented him from observing, Louis XV seemed to have lost "the sense of majesty" well before his people (Darnton 1993, 22). To this objective desacralisation of a king who forgets the duties attendant on his rank is joined the subjective desacralisation engendered by the "disrespectful discourses" of the pamphleteers who people the "mythological land" of royal politics with lascivious duchesses, homosexual priests, impotent princes and shameless ministers (Darnton 1991, 175). Political folklore, which spreads stories of moral depravity and abuse of power through public rumours, gradually transforms the "two bodies" of the king — the physical body and the sacred, political body that its his responsibility to incarnate — into a single, banal body that is no longer anything more than a toy in the hands of his "whores," a grotesque body suspected of an impotence that the people mocks.[2] The ontological alterity and inaccessibility of the world "on high" is severely compromised by the stories of the court's salacious and unscrupulous behaviour. The anonymous speech of public rumours, thus established as judge of the shameful mores of the aristocracy, makes it possible to demystify the symbolism of a power that claimed the mystery of transcendence. However, without mystery, the

king is nothing, for his claims to the throne rest on another claim, that of an interior illumination that must necessarily be obscure and incomprehensible to his subjects (Walzer 1992, 35 and 42).

By bringing the emptiness of this pretension to light, the rumours of decadence and despotism symbolised by the royal orgies, the unjustified imprisonment, necessarily have political public effects.[3] But, contrary to the diffusionist hypothesis, they don't take root in the secular critical reason of the philosophers. Plebeian opinion, where social rancoeur and attachment to the king intermingle, invents its own mode of desacralisation that partakes more of an emotional break-up with a monarch guilty of bad behaviour than of intellectual argument. Nevertheless, this emotional distancing is more than anecdotal; actually it marks the deterioration of the "ontological model" of the collectivity that absorbed the particular into the mystical body of the realm, symbolised by the sovereign (cf. Merlin 1994). By dissociating the "mere body of the king" from the symbolic body of the collectivity, it empties the royal word of its substance, that is to say of the people itself, which it could stand for with a "we, France" with the force of law (cf. Boureau, 1988).

For a Transversal Social Model of Opinions

It appears then that the *a posteriori* synthesis of enlightened opinion and popular opinion into a single counter-power that the great minds of the time are supposed to have led to victory is an error. The social distribution of opinions, too often concealed by the unitary figure of public opinion, is as relevant a fact in the eighteenth century as in ours, their heterogeneity manifesting the existence of interpretive communities as different in the form of their speech as in "the formality" of their practices (cf. de Certeau 1988). Nevertheless, if the level and impact of the demystification that these opinions impose on the established order needs to be differentiated, it is not necessary to empty the analysis of the basic points that partially justify their integration into the same "critical modes of thinking" (*mentalité critique*; Chartier 1991, 134). The enlightened public's repeated staging of contestation is not without consequence; it enables the commoners' loss of faith, still kept in check by fatalism, to be embodied by giving them the words to express it. In this way, placing a new repertory of contestation at their disposal gives form to a latent subversion that the progressive separation of the common people from the "institutions of belief," as de Certeau calls them, already made possible (cf. de Certeau 1981). More concretely, subversive statements, far from being confined to the sociocultural milieu that produced them, circulate in a network of polymorphous communication that imposes, at the moment of their "passage" into a determinate social sphere, its characteristic form of expression (cf. Darnton 1993). Thus, the gossip sustained by indiscrete courtiers is transformed into public gossip that is spread in the coffee houses and streets, then crystallised into a printed work taken to be exemplary thanks to the fame of the characters concerned and clever plotting. In pre-revolutionary France, orality and writing seem to function in unison.

The social and cultural differences between spaces of production, modes of interpretation, and means of expressing opinions evident in the spontaneous form of rumours, the hybrid form of written work, or even the sophisticated form of philosophical writings, testifies to the progressive materialisation of a not monolithic but rather composite court of opinion. Nevertheless, this heterogeneity can't be frozen, contrary to what the model of public space of the "first" Habermas suggests, into a

radical split that opposes term for term particular differences of opinion and general principals, the great ideas and lowly works, the public and the private, enlightened opinion and vulgar opinion. Certainly, popular culture, which we have less understood here through its social base, be it peasant or urban, than by the "repertory of themes and acts" that characterises it, maintains an ambiguous relationship to the Publicity principle (Chartier 1991, 142). For the actors of ordinary life, public opinion, in its semantic usage as in the social reality that it's supposed to designate, seems to retain the traditional sense of reputation that the enlightened public will later denounce as a mass of prejudices and "hearsay" incompatible with the fate slated for it by its noble identification with the exercise of critical reason. But this pre-literary sense takes nothing away from its potentially political scope. If the plebeian public opinion constituted by reputation has the power to make and unmake the common people's honour, it can also erode the prestige of the monarchy by revealing the king's escapades.

This point is fundamental because it allows us to revise Habermas' model. The analysis of "non-public" opinions shows that the subversive impact of the publicity that they make use of doesn't reside in the intrinsically political content of their object, like the government's "affairs." It's found in the very movement of making visible and accessible on the public square what the people itself considers to be worthy of interest. The object of publicity itself matters less, therefore, than the circulation of "opinions about" that the commoners dare display, whether they be about their own existence, everyday events, or the behaviour of the king and his court. By expressing an opinion, they already *de facto* contest their predestined role: that of giving their consent to the "public issues" (*la chose publique*) that official, religious, and punitive ceremonies, have the responsibility of deciding once and for all (Farge 1995, viii). However, once the publicity principle is primarily referred to the publicising process that makes it possible to *collectively* define what "counts as" an object of opinion, the analysis of public opinion must change focus.[4] It needs to bear on the procedures which govern this pooling together, even if it's founded on referents with as little apparently emancipatory value as conjugal disputes and the sexual mores of the dominant class. Otherwise said, the truly public nature of public opinion is certified neither by the substantial nature of its subject, the "public," nor by the intrinsic content of the object on which it bears, a petty news item or a matter of State; it's certified by the adoption of a common, and thus potentially *universalising*, point of view, that places in question, by its mere existence, the universality supposedly embodied by the political and moral authorities. This universalising movement is what necessarily sets public communication in motion, whether it be critical discussion or conversation or gossip that ensures, as Tarde says, "the communion of minds" (see Tarde, 1901/1989).The communication of opinions, regardless of their content, thus marks "the unanimous and contagious effort of harmonisation," the shared quest for "accord" that constitutes the very principle of the social bond (Tarde 1901/1989, 129). In this framework, public opinion, scholarly or popular, is not an innocent social phenomenon; to the contrary, it shows, in its form and not in its contents, that "the social act *par excellence* is to make [individual opinions] public," and thus capable of being shared, if they are not actually shared (Dupront 1965, 225).

From this more descriptive than normative perspective, the *a priori* epistemic division between the public's opinion and that of the people, just like the *a priori* juridical division between the private and the public, risks compromising under-

standing of the socio-historical reality of the eighteenth century (cf. Olivési 1995). It obscures the convergence of these opinions in one and the same direction, the one that makes public confidence the ultimate source of moral law. In fact, once private opinions appear in the public space of gossip or deliberation in order to sanction the actions of those in power by praise or blame, they assert themselves as supreme judge of good and evil. They counter "divine law," which decides through revelation what's sin or duty, and "the civil law" of the State, which regulates "Crime and Innocence," through coercion, with "the law of opinion or reputation" which distinguishes, through approbation, between "vice and virtue."[5] To the extent that the law of opinion aspires to be purely moral, its jurisdiction has no limit. Another's respect makes for as absolute and inviolable a law in the social world as that of the prince in the political world. Thus, the actual content of this law matters little; what matters is that it counters the mysteries of the Church and the political secrecy of the State with "a third power" that makes it possible to try anyone, including the sovereign, "before the moral court of society" (Koselleck 1979, 122). Within this analytical framework, the apparently incidental actions of the court which raise the wrath of the common people become essential stakes; public opprobrium makes it possible to designate the sphere of power as the very space of negation of the moral position henceforth represented by civil society.

Immediately, the "Law of reputation," particular to plebeian opinion, and the "philosophical Law," particular to enlightened opinion, which already designated, for Locke, one and the same law, that of public opinion, must be treated together. And the introduction of moral legitimacy is fundamentally revolutionary in its very principle: no one can escape another's opinion or control it, whether it be based on the abstract and rational rules that are supposed to govern man in general or on the concrete and everyday rules that must run the social life of men in particular. This convergent politicisation of public opinions, via the moralisation of power, compromises the overly strict epistemic hierarchy that separates, in Habermas, opinions that are "well informed" by rational procedures and potentially emancipatory cultural resources, and opinions that are "poorly informed" by prejudices and the self-evidence of *doxa*. For, from the socio-historical point of view, the differences which separate public opinions, grasped here from the point of view of processes of heterogeneous interaction that link men to each other, are more a matter of degree than of kind. For this reason, as Habermas will later recognise, it's appropriate to "pluralise" the public sphere in its formative phase and take into account the multiplicity of subjects uttering public words and the "centres of opinion" that correspond to them.[6]

From Ignorant People to Ignorance of the People

The retrospective rejection of the tutelage of literary opinions, if it enables us to rehabilitate "public curiosity" as one means amongst others to break the secrecy of politics, risks bringing out another bias almost as significant as intello-centrism: a "populist" bias that consists of immediately attributing to popular speech a reflective and performative ability that justifies its inscription on the horizon of autonomous and politically effective action.[7] This way of proceeding has a major drawback; in the desire to give, at all costs, a voice to people who have never been asked what they thought, the historian risks obscuring the objective social and epistemological differences that separate the informal organisation of popular rumour and the formal

organisation of reasonable argumentation (cf. Ozouf 1974). In fact, this approach is not content to do justice to the social complexity of the reality of a period by placing the stress on the multiplicity of public opinions; it likewise attempts to do justice to popular "cunning intelligence" by endowing it with the same communicative power as the intelligence of intellectuals.[8] By doing this, it short-circuits the intrinsic semantic value of the enlightened public's opinions as well as the level of objectification that is characteristic of them, which Habermas uses to found his ideal model of rationality. But above all, by shifting the seat of political action to the opinion of common people, this approach risks obscuring the social classification — which pretends, moreover, to be purely epistemic — that refuses to give public rumour the status of opinion. Finally, by focusing the analysis of public opinion on reputation and the circulation of viscious remarks, it tends to turn it into a transhistorical category which makes it impossible to take into account the immense normative labour that ideological discourses accomplished in order to assert it, between politics and philosophy, Revolution and Enlightenment, as the generic principle of government. And it thus forgets the symbolic and technical apparatuses that managed to individuate then assert, within the jumble of social occurrences that constitute the multitude of opinions, a single *politico-ideological* sense for public opinion.

For, popular movements hit up against a bourgeois social class, armed with economic power and symbolic capital, that managed to appropriate for itself the ideological superstructure of public opinion (see especially Eley 1992 and Fraser 1992). Certainly, the constitution of the bourgeois State, democratic in principle, had to compromise with the hardly "literary" protean forms by which all those who were practically barred from the civilised forms (*formes policées*) of criticism forced the doors of "publicity" and thus won political existence (Colliot-Thélène 1998, 36). But *the stake* of this "negotiation" seems scarcely democratic in so far as the mental tools (concepts, symbols) and the concrete systems (statistical and scientific techniques) that it deploys attempt to thwart the rise to power of the "low-lives" (Duprat 1998, 10). Thus, in order to avoid spontaneously conferring on the people the status of political actor that the very individuals who claim this status fight tooth and nail to deny it, we must analyse the ingenious alchemy that enabled the government of opinion to preserve the illusion of participation by all in political action, even while holding at arms length a people that proves, in fact, to be singularly "unpopular" (Ozouf 1989, 65).

Vox Populi, Vox Scientiae

In 1745, Louis XV's general comptroller of finances, Philibert Orry, sent the provincial administrators a questionnaire whose principle purpose was the census of individuals and their property. Nothing too original, the practice had been known for a century. What's more original, is the last instruction given to the "investigators:" "You will plant rumors in the cities . . . of your département about a one-third increase in import duties. You will also spread rumors . . . about a levying of two men per parish for a militia to be formed in the future . . . You will carefully record what the inhabitants say about this and you will mention it in the report that the King has requested of you" (cited by Lecuyer 1981, 173).

Orry just invented experimental social psychology and the art of governing with polls two centuries ahead of time. One can even praise him in the terms used by the historian Lynn Case to qualify the work of the French judicial and police authorities of

the 19th century, in this case, at the time of the Second Empire: their reports, he said, are a much better source for understanding opinion than the methods of Mr. Gallup! (cited by Blondiaux, 1998, p. 57n.) These days still, the State authorities, here and elsewhere, wisely divide their orders for opinion surveys between institutes in the public eye and more discrete administrative dispensaries specialising in information just for the State. Even if one hardly discusses the latest philosophical work there any more, coffee houses are still privileged sites for the expression of public opinion that a practised police ear will know how to pick up better than a survey questionnaire, even if its methodology resembles other, more routine, police methods, such as those by which one induces suspects, plaintiffs, or witnesses to make a statement ("where, when, how, how many times?").

It's not surprising then to find legal experts and criminologists in the forefront of modern theorists of opinion. This is the case of Gabriel Tarde, author of *Criminalité comparée* (1886), *The Laws of Imitation* (1890) and *L'opinion et la foule* (1901), whose works, quickly translated into English, exerted great influence on American social psychology, like those of his Italian colleague Sighele whose work *La folla delinguente* (1891) was translated the following year in French and in the five years following in all the major European languages. This meeting of the scholarly and the political is not coincidental: one century after a revolution that supposedly placed opinion in power, members of the political and scientific elite still interrogated the limits of this great principle about which the philosophers of the 18th century made a barrage of solemn declarations.

In his "Principles of Politics Applicable to All Representative Governments," Benjamin Constant wrote that "a man condemned to death by laws to which he consented is politically more free than someone who lives tranquilly under laws instituted without recourse to his will" (Constant 1980, 363). But how was it possible to imagine, not long after the Revolution, that these laws could emanate from an uncultured people that Taine, an extremely illustrious historian, described as follows in 1875 in *The Origins of Contemporary France*:

> *Take the still rude brain of one of our peasants and deprive it of the ideas which, for 80 years past, have entered it by so many channels, through the primary school established of each village, through the return of the conscript after his seven years' service, through the prodigious multiplication of books, newspapers, roads, railroads, foreign travel, and every species of communication. Try to imagine the peasant of that epoch, penned and shut up from father to son in his hamlet, without parish highways, deprived of news, with no instruction but the Sunday sermon, solicitous only for his daily bread and the imposts . . . not daring to repair his house, always persecuted, distrustful, his mind contracted and stinted, so to say, by misery. His condition is almost that of his ox or his ass, while his ideas are those of his condition* (Taine 1896, 374-375).

Venerated by his contemporaries in both Europe and the United States, Taine gives them a history of the French Revolution to make the bourgeoisie quake, without sparing its great figures: Robespierre, Danton, Marat are qualified as madmen and barbarians, manipulating a bloodthirsty mob prey to alcoholic delirium.

Wiser than Taine said, the victorious revolutionaries showed themselves to be, at first, partisans of stalling and only giving property-owners — males, of course — access to political rights, just as the Greeks had already done, reserving access to citizenship for *oïkosdespotès* alone, the masters of the house, owners of the means of production

(slaves) which allowed them to live without having to work with their hands. Nothing new, in this advent of a new era: in 1802, the Count Roederer, advisor to the government, writes as much, without mincing words, to the Premier Consul, the future Napoleon I: public opinion is that of the public, "that is to say, of that part of the nation which shares common interests with the entire people, but which has, more than the people, a comfortable living, leisure, good upbringing, conversational facility, and finally an opinion and the influence to make it win out, that is to say, the property owners" (cited by Blondiaux 1998, 55).

If another proof were necessary that one could only reasonably entrust the governance of the nation to the elites, Tocqueville will provide it, in another form, when he returns disenchanted from America, convinced that giving power to the opinion of the majority amounts to instituting a new despotism. Because "the majority lives in the perpetual utterance of self-applause," he writes, "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America. . . . The Inquisition has never been able to prevent a vast number of anti-religious books from circulating in Spain. The empire of the majority succeeds much better in the United States since it actually removes any wish to publish them" (Tocqueville 1990, 263 and 265).

The Fantasy of Decadence

But there's even more behind these doubts about the ability of the masses to manifest this spontaneous Cartesian rationalism that Tocqueville nevertheless continued to give the people credit for. For the 19th century bourgeois, labouring classes meant dangerous classes[9] and the people's opinion meant rumours (*rumeurs*), fickleness, folly, prejudice, viscious gossip (*ragot*), and when all is said and done, disorder, violence. The imagination of the class come to power through the revolution is fed by stories in which it glimpses the possibility of its destruction through the fury of the revolutionary crowds, those "excrements of the Nation" as Taine called them.

Already, in the preceding century, Edward Gibbon set the tone in his *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, inspired by a daydream amidst the ruins of classical Rome.[10] There's no doubt that history must repeat itself and the barbaric plebes will once again overwhelm civilisation. The nineteenth-century bourgeois sees the barbarian at his gate, as promised. He discovers their traits and disquieting mores in newspaper serials, notably those of Eugène Sue: his *Mysteries of Paris*, a raging success, draws its readers into "fearful curiosity"[11] about the seedy districts of the capital, the world, so near to the ritzy neighbourhoods, of the proletariat, the "hoodlums" (*apaches*), crime, and prostitution.

But bourgeois fantasies will also feed off another literature besides these novels paid by the line. This century's analysis of political and philosophical ideas sometimes takes after psychoanalysis, even scientific production, when it ventures into the sociological and anthropological. As Blondiaux (1998, 61) writes, "The birth of the social sciences coincides with the scientific confirmation of the *doxa* model's presuppositions, inferring, in the name of reason itself, the public's absence of rationality, its extreme malleability, and its always latent dangerousness."

Well before Gallup then, one will undertake to poll the unpollable, the masses, the multitudes (*le nombre*). A science of the State — as its etymology indicates — early statistics places itself in the service of a form of social science that will lend support to

the convictions of the bourgeois about himself and the other, as well as to his fears. In England, Galton confirms in his way, by calculation, the evolutionary theories of his illustrious cousin Darwin. By tracing the genealogies of the scholars, artists, writers, and men of State of his era, and applying to them the probability methods developed by Quételet, he establishes beyond a shadow of a doubt that genius is hereditary, an observation confirmed by Pearson at the beginning of the 20th century: comparing the fathers' professions to their sons', he easily deduces that the reproduction of the elites is a function of innate aptitudes.[12] It goes without saying that the reverse is necessarily true: criminologists, craniologists, and physionomists alike locate atavistic traits that contradict the belief that the man of the people could be turned into a good citizen. Doesn't he have the face of a criminal or a potential revolutionary? And what can be proven individually is even easier to prove when considering groups, as the first social psychologists of crowds will demonstrate. In opposition to the Italian Lombroso, the author of the notorious *L'uomo delinquente* (1876) who studied the configuration and weight of the brain of born criminals to find their links to "the primitive savage," Lacassagne, another illustrious criminologist advances this "sociological" argument: the criminal is a microbe but he needs a "culture," the social milieu (see Darmon 1989).

This time, vocabulary is borrowed from medicine, chemistry, to account for the gregariousness of the masses, the reactions that are unleashed there, the effects that they can have. Scientism feeds off of metaphors: Tarde sees the urban population as a milieu favouring feverish eruptions, *moral epidemics*. A doctor converted to sociology whose work will be translated into a dozen languages during his lifetime, Le Bon, in his *The Crowd, a Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) appeals to hygienics to describe how crowds are the seat of all contagious diseases. In Charcot's courses, attended by a certain person named Sigmund Freud, our explorers of lower class group behaviour find an answer to the infantile irrationality of the ferment that they observe: all of that is a matter of hypnosis but also hysteria, which causes Le Bon to write that the crowd is "feminine."

For Le Bon, the collective mechanisms observable in the crowd are the very negation of what's presupposed by democratic political activity. The group exerts powers of suggestion on the individual that make him abandon all reason in favour of his instincts alone, even if it means sacrificing his *personal interest*. Freud himself, even while distancing himself from Le Bon's explanation, will later applaud this description in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: "One must take into consideration the fact that when individuals come together in a group all their individual inhibitions fall away and all the cruel, brutal and destructive instincts, which lie dormant in individuals as relics of a primitive epoch, are stirred up to find free gratification" (Freud 1959, 15).

The Domestication of Opinion

One could endlessly multiply the examples of these thematic affinities visible in the works of the founders of the new social sciences as well as in political thinkers or literature: *themata*[13] that organise representations as well as a set of scientific problems, even though the responses to the problems posed differ, unless, more simply, the difference lies in the eventual interpretations made of them and whose oppositions can help mask the original similarities.

Nevertheless, in two apparently very different domains, the organisation of production and political organisation, an almost identical remedy that will be found

this time to the problem that, in final analysis, forms the substratum of the elites' representations of lower class behaviour and that Le Bon had identified as the ultimate explanation of their irrationality, the leader, since according to him, a herd can't do without a master. Never at a loss when it comes to metaphors, Tarde, for his part, will speak in his *Laws of Imitation* of the power of the chief as being like that of the hypnotist, the medium, who knows how to put the crowd into a somnambulistic state, a "cataleptic state," recalling the collective transes of primitive societies.[14]

In order to discipline the savage, to domesticate him, it's necessary to isolate him. In his very political *Principles of Scientific Management*, Frederick W. Taylor writes in 1911 that the issue of the organisation of work rests on an understanding of psychology. The average worker, on whom he will attempt his first experiments and whom he places in the category of "oxen" just like Taine, is certainly, "physically and mentally thick," but by nature "uncomplicated," "like young girls or kids:" a good word, a little attention from his supervisor suffice to make him produce. But put him in a group, let him "chatter" and problems begin, because in a group "men are pulled downwards, imitate the weakest," conspire to contest authority, to "deliberately trick the boss." At the heart of the techniques that he invented to fight these natural penchants, there is, even more than what's normally associated with his name (time-keeping, the study of movements, separation of conceptualisation and execution, etc.), a political principle of acting on the individual: dividing the group is the goal of the division of labour.

Even if the comparison might seem incongruous, we will take the liberty of comparing Taylor's writings and the minutes of contemporaneous French parliamentary debates on the question of whether it's necessary to change the electoral laws in order to better ensure the secrecy of the ballot, debates that will end in 1913 with the adoption of the voting booth. Studying the arguments of its partisans and adversaries, beyond what strangeness it reveals of political divisions, will lead us back to Tarde and Le Bon, as far as the majoritarian conception of opinion goes, and to all those, like Taylor, who have thought about ways of disciplining the masses, to borrow this time from Foucault.[15]

Let's see then what the right and left think about it.[16] Surprisingly, in final analysis, it's for the same reasons ultimately that one will fight for the voting booth and the other against it. For the aristocracy, which doesn't fail to make ironic remarks about the resemblance between a voting booth (*isoloir*) and a urinal (*urinoir*), hiding oneself in order to vote amounts to demeaning oneself, sinking to the level of people who have no opinion of their own, who vote in fear, in a fit of passion, in short, under another's influence. The left is in perfect agreement with this last point, on which it bases its campaign for the voting booth, knowing that its electorate votes under others' influence when it votes with a more or less open ballot under the gaze of the local worthies in presence and thus, in most cases, under the gaze of the employer, the factory or land owner, which often means the mayor or right-wing representative, as under the *ancien régime*.

Not knowing how to make its acts fall in line with its principles, which should have inclined them more towards Publicity, the left will win a Pyrrhean victory, having given the right what the latter logically should have claimed itself, a mechanism, which will be used by plenty of others, suited to exorcising its dread of the masses. The voting booth will reinforce the grand principles (universal and equal suffrage) but adds to the list of technologies of enclosure and serialisation of individuals analysed by

Foucault, by limiting opinion to the individual: imposed in the name of the fight against domination, the voting booth turns out to be one disciplinary technique amongst others, "a technology for severing social bonds" (Garigou 1988, 44). Beyond that, it symbolises an evolution in the political field's functioning which exorcises the fears that the whole political class has always manifested towards the "sovereign people." The voting booth reconfigures the political landscape on the basis of a dissociation and a recreation "of new ad hoc groupings — electorates — produced by the specific activity of political entrepreneurs. . . . At first, this dissociation is the artifice by which the act of voting is separated from other social activities, and in a way, emptied of its social content. In this sense, the voting booth . . . releases the voter from the straitjacket of the multiple bonds that define him socially." It concretises the institution of a new conception of the citizen-voter, "not that of processions and the reality of social groups, but that of the individual defined by his function and his relation to the entrepreneurs who offer their wares in the marketplace of political goods" (Garigou 1988, 45). The path is clear for Gallup and his European epigones, what was just said about the voting booth applying word for word to polls.

In retrospect, one might be astonished that it took so long to arrive at this solution. In fact, it is useful to remember that it's necessary to search in classical political economy for the origins of public opinion, which will be institutionalised in the first decades of this century by an electoral reform, then by its means of empirical display, the poll, which completes the mechanism. This new pacified political space is none other than the marketplace as surface of exchange theorised by Adam Smith[17] :

> *The eighteenth-century idea of public opinion parallels the economic idea of the free market economy. Here is the public composed of discussing circles of opinion, peers crowned by parliament; there is the market composed of freely competing entrepreneurs. As price is the result of anonymous, equally-weighted bargaining individuals, so is the public of public opinion the result of each man having thought out things for himself and contributing his weight to the great formation"* (Mills 1963, 354).

Is it necessary to recall that the great polling institutes often are nothing more than departments of organisations studying the market; that the old relation between *homo politicus* and *homo oeconomicus* finds itself theoretically and methodologically justified by the predominant practice of these institutes who have adopted the principles of *methodological individualism* and the definition that flows from it of what public opinion is: "The aggregate of similar public opinions about problems of public interest" (in Boudon et al. 1989, 142).

But let there be no mistake. Giving in to the rite of critiquing polls and the biased questions through which they suggest responses to the interviewees would mean missing the real problem. The heart of the matter lies elsewhere: in the effects that they produce in the functioning of the political system and in the place that public opinion occupies there. Fixating on criticising polls on a methodological level amounts to forgetting that behind the methods, there are always theories that have all the more chance of producing effects on reality in that they coincide with the dominant lines of force of an epoch. That's what we wanted to illustrate in bringing together some scientific paradigms and some ideas that have structured political thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in order to highlight their common substructure: what Max Weber has called "elective affinities" and Georges Duby "the

intellectual equipment" of a period, that by which one attempts to explain the specificity of modern apparatuses for the domestication of opinion (the voting booth, polls, but also the bureaucratisation of party apparatuses) in a process of co-construction, alloying, that has joined together political elites and scientific elites. It's because an entire scientific current shared the same presuppositions as almost the entire political class that administrative methods for grasping reality could easily find the necessary allies in the latter for their spread. It is necessary to recall here what Foucault wrote about the relationship between power and knowledge (and not only favouring it because it serves us or applying it because it's useful);

> *"There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. . . . the subject who knows, the objects to be known, and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations"* (Foucault 1977, 27-28).

Conclusion

If the concept of public opinion is indeed, from a normative point of view, the result of the disinterested communicative action recommended by Habermas, it comes across, from a socio-historical point of view, as a strategic tool in the service of instrumental action by individuals and groups associated with the exercise of power. As for the ideal fiction of the sovereign people, it is at odds with the "realist" political conception of the people, a people reduced to a raw material whose form and unity can only depend on those who are worthy of handling affairs of state and who are disdained as an anti-public against whom the "true public" must erect the safeguards of Reason (cf. Merlin 1994). Within this framework, public opinion is the consequence of a disciplinary process that attempts to educate the people in citizenship by substituting the codified, individualised, and intermittent forms of polls and elections for spontaneous and collective forms of popular action. Certainly, the nineteenth century also contributed to the development of new forms of expression, such as petitions, committees, resolutions, strikes, etc., which signal the construction of a politicised plebeian public sphere for which subversive publicity constitutes an alternative to the liberal organisation of civil society which Habermas focuses on.[18] But the twentieth century, by ascribing public opinion to an apparently asocial collection of individual states of mind, snatches from the concept of general will any reference to action and transforms, via mechanisms for recording opinions, the inorganic crowd that is impenetrable to governmental action into a carefully dispersed public (cf. Stourdzé 1972; Olivési 1995). The politics of transparency implied by the Publicity principle and which made it possible, ideally, to place the reasons behind the State's actions in plain view prove to be, in point of fact, an organised method for foreseeing the citizens' reasons for action. The more or less developed communicative reason that guided extra-institutional exchanges thus degenerates into a statistical reason that only gives the people "the illusion of politics" and favours a classed "us" that the politically administered narcissism of the bourgeoisie has managed progressively to assert as universal (Furet 1981).

Against this pessimistic observation, sociology can only bank on the normative point of view of "the ethics of discussion" that the "second" Habermas adopts, on

condition that it be revised (cf. Habermas 1993). For Habermas, the seat of social and political emancipation is no longer the monopoly of elite culture; its everyday communicative practice, rooted in "the lived world" of shared cultural conviction and mutual presumptions of truth, that constitutes the experimental laboratory of truly public opinion. However, once the public use of reason is widened to "communicative action" with respect to which every human being is competent, normative, moral and practical orientations of social life are no longer linked to bourgeois ideals which were rendered necessarily precarious by their inscription in a specific period and specific institutions. From then on, public opinion manifests, at least normatively, the presence of an *anthropological invariant*: social man's potential to reasonably establish, starting from openly competing individual opinions, a freely agreed upon consensus that enables political judgements at the "base" of society. In this perspective, it's clear that the "publicisation" of individual opinion can't be obtained by either its fusion into a general will or a public spirit that would unify the part and the whole, nor by its quantitative accumulation as a "non-public opinion" that makes a whole with parts. The form of totalisation that characterises public opinion, far from being statistical or "collectivist," is *procedural*, the horizon of its construction being the realisation, in the end, of a rational agreement in accordance with general interest.

All that remains then is to define the term "procedural" in a way that isn't satisfied with an ideal of consensus, necessarily damaging for minorities, but which is capable, to the contrary, of integrating the dissensus with which heterogeneous publics, with necessarily divergent interests and identities, are inevitably confronted (cf. McCarthy 1992). In the same gesture, the "procedural" constitution of public opinion must integrate different types of communities, not only the argumentative community made up of scholars and politicians, but also the community of "common knowledge" that ordinary agents hold, or think they hold, about each other (see Lewis 1969). In fact, the ideal public opinion that Habermas speaks of, although founded on objective facts, is not necessarily shared, the intrinsic validity of an argument not allowing one to conclude that it will garner another's agreement. On the other hand, "common opinion" is a mutual opinion that each person adopts in the belief that everyone shares it (cf. Livet 1990); it is thus taken for truth less because of its intrinsic content than because of the dynamic of agreement that it solicits, every one being "naturally" disposed to endorse an opinion that he believes to be common.

This definition of public opinion as common opinion has the advantage, compared to its ethico-normative model, of taking into account its actual historical status by reconceptualising it as the emergent effect of interwoven interindividual references, simultaneously descriptive — but what do other people think? — and prescriptive — what should the majority think? Furthermore, it allows us to recover the notion of mentality that socio-cultural history proposes saving, at least partially; for mentality can be defined not as an opinion that is, in fact, common, which risks ratifying the illusion of oneness of an unlikely "spirit of society," but as the set of possible points of view about the world. "A mentality is not only the fact that several individuals think the same thing: this thought, in each of them, is, in various ways, marked by the fact that the others think it also" (Veyne 1974, 113). For Arendt, its this propensity for "a broadened mentality" that makes men capable of raising a particular case to the rank of common problem thus actualising the sum of possible opinions that they potentially carry in themselves (cf. Arendt 1968). In this analytical framework, all opinions, even

developed in solitude, are public; for they are, more or less, representative of position-takings of those who, even when empirically absent, remain present in mind, no one being able to escape "this world of universal interdependence, where I can make myself the representative of everybody else" (Arendt 1968, 242; see the elaboration in Quéré, 1990). This movement of universalisation can rest on the mutual opinion that enables minorities to keep silent what they can't say without risking the blame of the majority. But they can also depart from this logic of conformity and bank on the communicative rationality that allows anyone to go beyond his place in order to join the universal community that the revolutionary ideal was able to glimpse.

Translated from French by Matthew Lazen.

Notes:

1.The expression is from Febvre 1953.

2. On the subject of the two bodies of the king, see the pioneering work of Kantorowicz 1989.

3. On the importance of rumors and the effects that public declarations, be they informal, can have on the social order, cf. Kaplan 1982.

4. The use of this expression "counts as" is far from being innocent. The philosopher John Searle uses it, in fact, to describe the process of institutionalization that enables a group of individuals to endow brute facts, which are meaningless a priori, with a social value that is totally meaningful - see Searle 1995.

5. The very famous distinction between these three laws comes from John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, § 7-10. Cited by Koselleck 1979, 58. [Chapter 28, "Of Other Relations," 352-354 of Locke, John. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.]

6. On the exhibition of centers of opinion, notably during the revolutionary period, see Monnier 1994.

7. This criticism, particularly aimed at the work of Arlette Farge, is found in Guilhaumou 1992, 279.

8. On this nice notion of cunning intelligence, see Détienne and Vernant 1991.

9. We borrow this expression from the title of the work by Chevalier 1981.

10. This same Italy inspires this pessimistic musing by Taine: "What a cemetery of history!"

11. The term, invented by Eugčne Sue himself, is repeated by Marx and Engels in *The Holy Family* dedicated to this serial writer.

12. On Galton and Pearson, see especially Desrosičres 1998.

13. We borrow this term, changing it slightly, from Holton, 1982. [This French work cited by the authors is a translation of selections from two English works where Holton discusses themata, *The Scientific Imagination: Case Studies* and *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought: Kepler to Einstein*.]

14. On this aspect of Tarde's thought, see Mucchielli 1998.

15. It is worth recalling that the first work published by Tarde begins with a critical reading of the works of Jeremy Bentham, who is at the heart of the analyses developed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

16. We take the essence of this analysis from Garigou 1988.

17. On this subject, cf. Mairet, in Smith, 1976.

18. Eley 1992, 329. It is easier to understood then the importance that the democrats assign to the existence of spontaneous public spaces and their "enlightenment praxis," as Eley says, intermittent and pre-formatted vote-casting obviously not sufficing for there to be popular participation in government.

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