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Reader in  
Public Opinion  
and  
Mass Communication

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Third Edition

EDITED BY ·

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# Public Opinion

A. LAWRENCE LOWELL

"VOX POPULI MAY BE VOX DEI, but very little attention shows that there has never been any agreement as to what Vox means or as to what Populus means." In spite of endless discussions about democracy, this remark of Sir Henry Maine is still so far true that no other excuse is needed for studying the conceptions which lie at the very base of popular government. In doing so one must distinguish the form from the substance; for the world of politics is full of forms in which the spirit is dead—mere shams, but sometimes not recognized as such even by the chief actors, sometimes deceiving the outside multitude, sometimes no longer misleading anyone. Shams are, indeed, not without value. Political shams have done for English government what fictions have done for English law. They have promoted growth without revolutionary change. But while shams play an important part in political evolution, they are snares for the political philosopher who fails to see through them, who ascribes to the forms a meaning that they do not really possess. Popular government may in substance exist under the form of a monarchy and an autocratic despotism can be set up without destroying the forms of democracy. If we look through the forms to observe the vital forces behind them; if we fix our attention, not on the procedure, the extent of the franchise, the machinery of elections, and such outward things, but on the essence of the matter, popular government, in one important aspect at least, may be said to consist of the control of political affairs by public opinion. In this book, therefore, an attempt is made to analyze public opinion in order to determine its nature, the conditions under which it can exist, the subjects to which it can apply, the methods by which it can be faithfully expressed, and the regulations under a popular government of affairs to which it is not directly applicable.

Each of the two words that make up the expression "public opinion"

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significant, and each of them may be examined by itself. To fulfil the requirement an opinion must be public, and it must be really an opinion. Let us begin with the first of these qualities.

If two highwaymen meet a belated traveller on a dark road and propose to relieve him of his watch and wallet, it would clearly be an abuse of terms to say that in the assemblage on that lonely spot there was a public opinion in favor of a redistribution of property. Nor would it make any difference, for this purpose, whether there were two highwaymen and one traveller, or one robber and two victims. The absurdity in such a case of speaking about the duty of the minority to submit to the verdict of public opinion is self-evident; and it is not due to the fact that the three men on the road form part of a larger community, or that they are subject to the jurisdiction of a common government. The expression would be quite as inappropriate if no organized state existed; on a savage island, for example, where two cannibals were greedy to devour one shipwrecked mariner. In short the three men in each of the cases supposed do not form a community that is capable of a public opinion on the question involved. May this not be equally true under an organized government, among people that are for certain purposes a community?

To take an illustration nearer home. At the time of the Reconstruction that followed the American Civil War the question whether public opinion in a southern state was, or was not, in favor of extending the suffrage to the negroes could not in any true sense be said to depend on which of the two races had a slight numerical majority. One opinion may have been public and general in regard to the whites, the other public or general in regard to the negroes, but neither opinion was public or general in regard to the whole population. Examples of this kind could be multiplied indefinitely. They can be found in Ireland, in Austria-Hungary, in Turkey, in India, in any country where the cleavage of race, religion, or politics is sharp and deep enough to cut the community into fragments too far apart for an accord on fundamental matters. When the Mohammedans spread the faith of Islam by the sword, could the question whether public opinion in a conquered country favored Christianity or Mohammedanism be said to depend on a small preponderance of numbers of the Christians or the followers of the Prophet; and were the minority under any obligation to surrender their creed? The government was entirely in the hands of the Mussulmans, but would it be rational to assert that if they numbered ninety-nine thousand against one hundred thousand Christians public opinion in the country was against them, whereas if they were to massacre two thousand of the Christians public opinion would be on their side? Likewise in Bohemia at the present day, where the Germans and the Czechs are struggling for supremacy, would there not be an obvious fallacy in claiming that whichever race could show a bare majority could have the support of public opinion in requiring its own language to be taught to all the children in the schools.

In all these instances an opinion cannot be public or general with respect to both elements in the state. For that purpose they are as distinct as they belonged to different commonwealths. You may count heads, you may break heads, you may impose uniformity by force; but on the matters at stake the two elements do not form a community capable of an opinion that is in any rational sense public or general. As Mr. Bryce points out, a great deal of confusion arises from using the term sometimes to mean everybody's views, that is, the aggregate of all that is thought, and sometimes the views of the majority. If we are to employ the term in a sense that is significant for government, that imports any obligation moral or political on the part of the minority, surely enough has been said to show that the opinion of a mere majority does not by itself always suffice. Something more is clearly needed.

But if the opinion of a majority does not of itself constitute a public opinion, it is equally certain that unanimity is not required. To confine the term to cases where there is no dissent would deprive it of all value and would be equivalent to saying that it rarely, if ever, exists. Moreover, unanimous opinion is of no importance for our purpose, because it is perfectly sure to be effective in any form of government, however despotic, and it is therefore, of no particular interest in the study of democracy. Legislation by unanimity was actually tried in the kingdom of Poland, where each member of the assembly had the right of *liberum veto* on any measure, and it prevented progress, fostered violence, and spelled failure. The Polish system has been lauded as the acme of liberty, but in fact it was directly opposed to the fundamental principle of modern popular government; that is, the conduct of public affairs in accord with a public opinion which is general, although not universal, and which implies under certain conditions a duty on the part of the minority to submit.

If then unanimity is not necessary to public opinion and a majority is not enough, where shall we seek the essential elements of its existence? A suggestion much in point may be found in the speculations of the most ingenious political philosopher of the eighteenth century. In his *Contrat Social* Rousseau attempts to prove that in becoming a member of a state the natural man may remain perfectly free and continue to obey only his own will. He tells us that in forming a state men desire to enforce the common will on all the members; and he takes as the basis of all political action this common will, which is nearly akin to our idea of public opinion. Now, in order to reconcile the absolute freedom of every citizen to obey only his own will with the passing of laws in every civilized state against opposition, he says that when the assembled people are consulted on any measure, their votes express, not their personal wishes upon the subject, but their opinions regarding the common will, and thus the defeated minority have not their desires thwarted, but have simply been mistaken in their views about the common will. All men, he insists, want to give effect to this common

which becomes, therefore, the universal will of everyone and is always acted out.

Though stated in a somewhat fanciful way, the theory contains a highly important truth, which may be clothed in a more modern dress. A body of men are politically capable of a public opinion only so far as they are agreed on the ends and aims of government and upon the principles by which those ends shall be attained. They must be united, also, about the means whereby the action of the government is to be determined, in a conviction, for example, that the views of a majority—or it may be some other portion of their numbers—ought to prevail; and a political community as a whole is capable of public opinion only when this is true of the great bulk of the citizens. Such an assumption was implied, though usually not expressed in the theories of the Social Compact; and, indeed, it is involved in all theories of that base rightful government upon the consent of the governed, for the consent required is not a universal approval by all the people of every measure enacted, but a consensus in regard to the legitimate character of the ruling authority and its right to decide the questions that arise.

The power of the courts in America to hold statutes unconstitutional furnishes an illustration of this doctrine. It rests upon a distinction between those things that may be done by ordinary legislative procedure and those that may not; the theory being that in the case of the former the people have consented to abide by the decision of the majority as expressed by their representatives, whereas in the case of matters not placed by the constitution within the competence of the legislature, the people as a whole have given no such consent. With regard to these they have agreed to abide only by a decree uttered in more solemn forms, or by the determination of something greater than a mere majority. The court, therefore, in holding a statute unconstitutional, is in effect deciding that it is not within the range of acts which the whole people have given their consent; so that while the opinion in favor of the act may be an opinion of the majority of the voters, it is not a public opinion of the community, because it is not one where the people as a whole are united in a conviction that the views of the majority, at least as expressed through the ordinary channels, ought to prevail.

We have seen that in some countries the population has contained, and that matter still contains, distinct elements which are sharply at odds upon the vital political questions of the day. In such a case the discordant forces may be violent enough to preclude a general consent that the opinion of the majority ought to prevail; but this is not always true. If they are not, the assumption which lies at the foundation of popular government remains unimpaired. If they are, the forms of democracy may still be in operation, although their meaning is essentially altered. It may be worth while to dwell on this contrast a moment because it makes clear the difference between true public opinion and the opinion of a majority.

Leaving out of account those doctrines whereby political authority is

traced to a direct supernatural origin, government among men is commonly based in theory either on consent or on force, and in fact each of these factors plays a larger or smaller part in every civilized country. So far as the preponderating opinion is one which the minority does not share, but which it feels ought, as the opinion of the majority, to be carried out, the government is conducted by a true public opinion or by consent. So far as the preponderating opinion is one the execution of which the minority would resist by force if it could do so successfully, the government is based upon force. At times it may be necessary to give effect to an opinion of the majority against the violent resistance, or through the reluctant submission, of the minority. A violent resistance may involve the suppression of an armed insurrection or civil war. But even when there is no resort to actual force, it remains true that in any case where the minority does not concede the right of the majority to decide, submission is yielded only to obviously superior strength; and obedience is the result of compulsion, not of public opinion. The power to carry out its will under such conditions must to some extent be inherent in every government. Habitual criminals are held in check by force everywhere. But in many nations at the present day there are great masses of well-intentioned citizens who do not admit the right of the majority to rule. These persons and the political parties in which they group themselves are termed irreconcilable, and when we speak of public opinion in that country we cannot include them. So far as they are concerned there can be no general or public opinion.

Let us be perfectly clear upon this point. The presence of irreconcilables does not mean that the government is illegitimate, or that it is not justified in enforcing its will upon the reluctant minority. That will depend upon other considerations. The use of force may be unavoidable if any settled government is to be upheld, if civic order is to be maintained. But it does not mean that the fundamental assumption of popular government, the control of political affairs by an opinion which is truly public, is set aside. Florence may, or may not, have been justified in disfranchising her noble families, but Freeman was certainly right in his opinion that by so doing she lost her right to be called a democracy,—that is, a government by all the people, and it makes little difference for this purpose whether a part of the body politic is formally excluded from any share in public affairs or overawed by force into submission.

One more remark must be made before quitting the subject of the relation of public opinion to the opinion of the majority. The late Gabriel Tarde, with his habitual keen insight, insisted on the importance of the intensity of belief as a factor in the spread of opinions. There is a common impression that public opinion depends upon and is measured by the mere number of persons to be found on each side of a question; but this is far from accurate. If forty-nine percent of a community feel very strongly on one side, and fifty-one percent are lukewarmly on the other, the former opinion has

greater public force behind it and is certain to prevail ultimately if it does so at once. The ideas of people who possess the greatest knowledge of a subject are also of more weight than those of an equal number of ignorant persons. If, for example, all the physicians, backed by all other educated men, are confident that an impure water supply causes typhoid fever, while the rest of the people are mildly incredulous, it can hardly be said that the public opinion is opposed to that notion. One man who holds his belief tenaciously counts for as much as several men who hold theirs weakly, because he is more aggressive, and thereby compels and overawes others into apparent agreement with him, or at least into silence and inaction. This is, perhaps, especially true of moral questions. It is not improbable that a large part of the accepted moral code is maintained by the earnestness of a minority, while more than half of the community is indifferent or unconvinced. In short, public opinion is not strictly the opinion of the numerical majority, and no form of its expression measures the mere majority, for individual views are always to some extent weighed as well as counted. Without attempting to consider how the weight attaching to intensity and intelligence can be accurately gauged, it is enough for our purpose to point out that when we speak of the opinion of a majority we mean, not the numerical, but the effective majority.

No doubt differences in the intensity of belief explain some sudden transformations in politics and in ethical standards, many people holding their views with so little conviction that they are ready to follow in the wake of any strong leader in thought or action. On the other hand they explain in part also cases where a law is enacted readily but enforced with difficulty; for the law may be carried through by a comparatively small body of very earnest men, who produce a disproportionate effect by the heat of their conviction; while the bulk of the people are apathetic and unwilling to support the effort required to overcome a steady passive resistance to the enforcement of the law.

The problem of intensity of belief is connected, moreover, with the fact that different ways of ascertaining the popular will may give different results, in accordance with the larger or smaller proportion of the indifferent who are gathered in to vote. But this is a matter that belongs properly to a later discussion of the methods of expressing public opinion. We are dealing here only with its essential nature.

To sum up what has been said in this chapter: public opinion to be worthy of the name, to be the proper motive force in a democracy, must be really public; and popular government is based upon the assumption of public opinion of that kind. In order that it may be public 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 or by fear, to accept it; and if democracy is complete the submission of the minority must be given ungrudgingly. An essential difference between

government by public opinion as thus defined and by the bare will of a selfish majority has been well expressed by President Hadley. After saying that laws imposed by a majority on a reluctant minority are commonly inoperative, he adds, "It cannot be too often repeated that those opinions which a man is prepared to maintain at another's cost, but not at his own, count for little in forming the general sentiment of a community, or in producing any effective public movement."

## Nations and Classes: The Symbols of Identification

HAROLD D. LASSWELL

WHEN ERNST WERNER TECHOW, Erwin Kern, and Hermann Fischer assassinated Walther Rathenau in 1922, they invoked the name of the Fatherland, the monarchy, the spirit of Potsdam. When Friedrich Adler shot the Austrian Finance Minister in 1916, he said it was not because he desired publicity, or because he enjoyed the pleasure of murdering his fellow man, but because the working classes required it. When Pilsudski and Stalin robbed banks in the years before 1917, they said it was not because they needed money and adventure for themselves, but because the overthrow of czarism and the liberation of the oppressed working masses of the world demanded it. When the Paris commune was drowned in blood, it was because the interests of "patriotism" and of "civilization" required it. The millions who struggled from 1914 to 1918 in the thin zones which surrounded the Central Powers were fighting for "God," "country," "civilization," "humanity," "international law," "a war to end war," and a "lasting peace."

The role of these justifying symbols in politics is one of the principal topics of analytic inquiry. With which acts are particular symbols connected? How are the justifying symbols grouped geographically throughout the world? How are they related to one another and to the whole context of political change? The embittered paranoiac who slays the first passer-by whom he suspects of turning destructive rays upon him is of mediocre interest to the student of politics, though a paranoiac like Gorgulov who kills the President of France as the "enemy" of his people becomes relevant on account of

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