

## PUBLIC OPINION, ITS INFLUENCE AND AUTHORITY

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It has been well said that, "the social relations of any group are determined, in the last analysis, by the motives of its individual members."<sup>1</sup> Man's very nature demands that he live in society. Living thus, he must be influenced by his associates, but, what is more fundamental, he in turn influences his fellows. This interaction of men one upon another is the life and guidance of society. Hence the importance of individual motives. Among the first results of this condition is the production of what we call public opinion. It is the purpose of this paper to outline briefly the nature of this community sentiment, its influence upon the individual, and the authority which may be conceded to it. It may be noted in passing that charity, the bond of social union, must hold an important place in the private conscience if public opinion is to remain sound.

Public opinion may be described as the prevailing opinion in a community. To be prevailing it must be common to the majority. It makes little difference where the particular thought, if it is a thought, had its origin. Often it is impossible to trace it to any definite nursery. Frequently, as Newman observes, it is merely a condition in which everybody in general and nobody in particular is opining.<sup>2</sup> Wherever it arises, or under whatever circumstances, that it exists as a public possession cannot be denied. In every instance this opinion, rightly or wrongly, purports to be advanced solely in the interests of the commonweal. That is why it is commonly accepted, that is why it is the prevailing thought of the community, and finally that is why it so readily lends itself to deception and is so often used as a hoax to promote selfish policies and at times to justify inglorious legislation.

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Williams, *Principles of Social Psychology* (New York, 1922), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Historical Sketches* (London, 1903), III, 3.

As the size of the community varies, the scope of public opinion is altered. For instance, the topics of discussion about which the public forms an opinion will have a much wider range in a city than in a hamlet. This is so either because the problems that confront the city-folk are more numerous, or because the elements composing the common thought are more diverse. Nevertheless the unifying principle is the same, *viz.*, a public advantage to be obtained or a public danger to be avoided. It is manifest that a common danger will arouse and consolidate public opinion more quickly and much more effectively than anything else. That this is true cannot be doubted. It is affirmed by the very nature of man whose first impulse or repulse is for self-preservation. This basic instinct is applied to an impending public calamity either because a common danger is more overwhelmingly personal, or because the successful avoidance of it necessarily implies the possession of a proportionate good.

Public opinion is as old as man precisely because the natural instincts of the rational animal are just that old. It exists today among barbaric tribes. Our own barbaric ancestors experienced it, and it was just as prominent in the lives of their forefathers who were not so barbarous. As civilization progresses, as the populace in general becomes more enlightened, it becomes more clearly defined, more influential because more skeptical, more authoritative because the masses have wrested a greater degree of power from their various governments. Nevertheless the principal problems arising from it are the same today as they were at the catastrophe of Babel, which is a manner of saying that it is still quite gullible, for a cleverly constructed mirage is as capable of winning its unqualified assent today as ever.

An important factor in the maintenance of public opinion is man's innate desire for knowledge. This is a psychological fact which demands consideration. It is easily observed whether we take as our subject the child with his interminable whys, or the adult with his skeptical how and wherefore. This desire has not always been as acute as it is today; nor does our own day exhibit it in its most devouring mood. At the same time we can safely say that the modern era permits this appetite to pursue a natural course handicapped by fewer obstacles than ever before. Present-day methods are constantly furnishing real opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge. In spite of the many shams that are now, as always, being perpetrated in the name

of Science, many attempts have been made, and not a few lives spent, in an endeavor to give to the world the benefit of true and honest research. The acceptance of these endeavors has conferred inestimable benefits upon private thought, and in proportion to the development of the individual intelligence public opinion quite naturally becomes more rational. As a consequence of this intelligent reasoning on the part of the people their demands become more trustworthy and therefore more valuable.

While time has favored all nations with increasing facilities for the establishment and development of a healthy public opinion, there is no nation which has felt this beneficence to quite the same extent as our own United States. This might possibly be explained by saying that the character of our people is more progressive. However, it is due to a more fundamental cause, i. e., to the unique and popular constitution under which this advance is made possible. The famous "Bill of Rights," contained in this instrument, unshackles the civic mind, permits freedom of thought and countenances liberty of speech and of the press almost to the point of indulgence. Providing, as it does, for its own amendment, the Constitution furnishes the sound basis for a popular government. It quite naturally follows that a public so favored will continue to impose its will upon legislators. Whether this will be for good or evil depends very largely upon the use the citizen makes of the exceptional educational advantages now offered to him. Not that any community intends to inflict harm upon its government—quite the contrary—but because public opinion in order to exercise its intended power for good must be rational. We cannot expect such a wholesome popular trend without the individual accepting certain intellectual and moral truths. The moral are more important than the intellectual. To look for the maintenance of a healthy public thought without a well-distributed and sound knowledge of practical ethics, would be expecting too much of human nature.

Like all forms of practical thought, we would scarcely be aware of public opinion unless we could feel and observe its influence. It is impossible to name an individual or an institution of man that is not affected by public opinion. To begin with, the moral code of nations is formed and sometimes changed in proportion as popular sentiment approves or repudiates. It is true that this voice of the people is most generally shaped and

directed by individuals or cliques, nevertheless it is the people through whom they must work their will, and accordingly they are discreet.

With this jurisdiction over the moral order as their principal weapon the people have demanded to be heard on every conceivable piece and phase of legislation. They care little what the nature of the particular legislation may be, whether it is the simple matter of paving Main Street, or the more delicate concerns of our foreign relations. It makes no difference; the mass clamors to be heard, and generally is. It is significant that, if legislators disobey this voice, they seldom do so professedly and they never quite entirely disregard it. Public opinion is particularly potent in this country on account of the advantages of a truly unshackled franchise. Every law must have its sanction and as public feeling at time, rightly or wrongly, almost amounts to law, or at least results in law, the greatest influence of public opinion comes from the right to re-indorse or repudiate its representatives.

While human nature is by no means as gullible as Mr. Barnum maintained, nor so fickle as some would have us believe, nevertheless it cannot be denied that in general it is often overcredulous and frequently subject to changing moods. This credulity arises primarily from a natural curiosity, which is akin to the desire for knowledge, and is led astray by the lack of proper norms with which to judge the evidence presented by a supposedly capable and trustworthy exponent. This curiosity, however, is usually exhausted before the individuals form the public. The mutual action and reaction of the many exposes the nature of the certitude which the thought contains and the quality of credulity demanded by any opinion proposed as common. In spite of this, a gullible public opinion is possible, but the disease is always of a temporary nature. Why it cannot be perpetual was explained by Lincoln, “. . . you can't fool all of the people all of the time.”<sup>3</sup>

The changeableness of human nature is a more permanent factor than its excessive credulity, and hence plays a more potent part in promoting and in restricting the influence of public opinion. The individual cannot subject his moods to the common good until he has mastered them himself. This is done by

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<sup>3</sup> I. M. Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1895), Vol. IV, Appendix.



many, but they are by no means in the majority, and, until this practice becomes more universal, the individual changeableness will be a hindrance to the general public. Some idea of the nature of this phenomenon may be gained from the fact that at one time public opinion may lend its unqualifying assent to a measure and with the passage of time consider the same idea as absurd. Considering the same phenomenon in another mood, it is impossible to estimate the number of good measures which have been popularly scrapped and the action regretted. This changeableness of human nature, and consequently of public sentiment, has at least one good effect in that it serves to restrict the influence of the popular voice.

First of all it cautions the individual to inquire into the nature and origin of this sentiment which he both molds and follows. As a result of this it makes the general public, if not more hesitant, at least more rational in making demands upon the legislator. As to the representative of the people, it warns him that his duty is to consider the welfare of the people rather than public opinion, especially when these terms, as not infrequently happens, are far from synonymous. When this restriction hampers a needed reform, it is regrettable; but even then it serves to demonstrate more forcefully what a power a healthy and rational public opinion can attain.

Provincialism plays an important part in limiting the direct influence of national upon international thought. This phenomenon arises principally as a result of geographical distances and other differences. It is seldom that public opinion in one country is in perfect harmony with that of another. This is due to three main causes, *viz.*, racial differences, varying forms of government, and the existence of certain customs which may be peculiar to one nation. The recognition of this restriction is paramount in promoting harmony between nations. This phenomenon is more properly called nationalism and can be called provincialism only in relation to an idealistic unity of the nations. Provincialism, in its more proper and consequently in its more potent form, exists within the confines of a particular country. The greater the territorial expansion of a country, the more evident does this factor become. It is particularly manifest in the United States, where one section is termed industrial, another agricultural, and still another mining, to mention but a few. Each one of these districts has its own particular advantages and

public needs. Hence arise the various provincial customs and modes of thought, which, when they meet in a centralized government, are naturally destined to delay and control the national sentiment.

A God-fearing and consequently a law-abiding citizenry is, of all, the most necessary requisite, if public opinion is to exercise an influence for good. The laws of God and of men are made not only for individuals but also for nations. A well-ordered public opinion will lead men to God as surely as it will protect national institutions and rights. When regulated as it should be, community sentiment will place the laws of God and of country before itself. This follows from its boast of being honest and desirous of the common good. A misdirected and wanton public opinion will influence many thoughtless men whose only desire is to follow the mob. It is in this instance that a right-intentioned and determined minority is obliged to make itself heard and restrict such an influence before it is too late. The people exercise an important and legitimate influence in making laws and should exercise the same influence in modifying or abrogating bad ones; but they should always remain subservient to them while they exist. The power given to the American people under our Constitution is unparalleled and in this we pride ourselves. Nevertheless this very liberty, if not kept within proper limits, if it does not subject itself to lawfully constituted authority, will bring about its own destruction.

It is a striking fact that public opinion claims for itself an authority which should be conceded only to infallible truth, yet from its very name it cannot be considered as having metaphysical certitude. At best it contains but moral certitude. An individual can be morally sure that what the voice of the people persistently proclaims or clamors for has some, and quite frequently a convincing, degree of truth. The real authority which it exercises comes first of all from the fact that it is accumulated common sense, and should be trusted only in so far as the general intelligence of the community is dependable. Public thought, when misdirected or mistaken, will undoubtedly right itself in time; but meanwhile it should be viewed with a sort of sympathetic skepticism. Without this individual skepticism it often becomes impulsive. In such a condition it is just a little above the spontaneity of the mob and very probably will corrupt or destroy that which it was intended to benefit.

The authority of public opinion is greatly enhanced by the support of an honest and trustworthy press. In this sense the value of public opinion is determined by the reputation of the press that supports it. If the press allows itself to become the instrument of corrupt or petty politics, or if it degenerates, as it frequently does, so far as to use sensational tactics, then there is no more baneful influence in undermining confidence in public opinion. When rightly regulated and of proved honesty it affords one of the most potent and reliable reasons for relying upon popular sentiment, for it not only champions the will of the people, but plays its most important part when it enters into the formation and enunciation of what this will is. It appears before us, whether in the form of books, pamphlets, or newspapers, as a moral personage; but behind this moral force must stand thinking and reliable men who are guided by sound and upright ethical principles. Because a press of this nature is possible, Cardinal Gibbons held that it is the duty of all men to act on public opinion through this powerful instrument for good.

Judged solely upon its intrinsic merits, the authority of public opinion becomes dubious. It is impossible, however, to adequately estimate and to fully appreciate its weight without taking into account the extrinsic elements which increase its jurisdiction. First of all public opinion exercises an influence upon the popular mind and is recognized by it as an authority. As has been stated, a wholesome press lends support to a healthy public opinion. More and more civil constitutions are recognizing its legitimate place in government. All these, acting and reacting as they do upon the common thought, undoubtedly serve to enhance its authority and at times to raise it above mere opinion into the realm of certitude.

It is just because so many elements, of necessity, enter into the formation, development, and maintenance of this community sentiment that the legislator and private citizen must be jealous of the credence they give to it. It is not infallible, because all the elements in its composition are distinctly human; but it cannot be ignored any more than the common problems of mankind can be ignored. When the real extent of its authority is understood by its adherents it becomes their safe guide. Before accepting it as a norm it should be studied, for, "Public opinion on any subject always has a 'central idea' from which all its

minor thoughts radiate."<sup>4</sup> The question to be decided is not whether or not public opinion should be followed, but when and under what circumstances. This cannot be decided by any abstract theories. Its solution depends mainly upon the circumstances proper to each particular community sentiment.

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<sup>4</sup>J. G. Nicolay and J. Hay, *The Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1886).

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