

Pierre Bourdieu

PUBLIC OPINION DOES NOT EXIST

(France, 1972)

"I say that to speak is to express an opinion, and that opinion consists of an explicitly pronounced discourse." Plato

First of all, I should make clear that my purpose is not to mechanically and simplistically denounce public opinion polls. Even if there is no doubt that opinion polls are not what they would have us believe, they are not what many would-be demystifiers have claimed either. The polls can make a useful contribution to social science if they are treated rigorously with certain precautions. Neither am I attacking the people who carry out opinion polls; they are doing a certain job which, if not reducible to the pure and simple sale of products, can not be completely identified with legitimate scientific research either.

THREE IMPLIED POSTULATES

Having thus prefaced my remarks, I would like to enumerate three implied assumptions which must be challenged in order to arrive at a rigorous and solid analysis of opinion polls:

—first, every opinion poll supposes that everyone can have an opinion; or, stated otherwise, that the production of an opinion is within everyone's range of possibility. At the risk of offending a naively democratic sentiment, I contest this;

—second, it is taken for granted that all opinions have the same value. I believe that it can be proven that this is far from the truth, and that by gathering a plurality of opinions which do not have the same real importance, the results are very severely distorted; and

—third, the simple fact of asking everyone the same question implies the hypothesis that there is a consensus about the problem, that is, an agreement about which questions are worth asking.

These three postulates imply, it seems to me, a whole series of distortions which can be found even when all the conditions for methodological rigor are fulfilled in the gathering and analysis of the data.

Opinion polls are often criticized on technical grounds, by challenging the representativity of the samples, for instance. Given the methods presently used by the polling institutes these objections hardly

seem valid to me. They are also accused of biasing the questions, or more accurately, of providing a bias in the formulation of the questions. This is closer to the truth, and often an answer is inferred by the way in which the question is posed. Thus, in spite of the elementary precept behind the composition of a questionnaire, which requires that one give all possible answers "a chance", omissions are frequently made either in the questions themselves or in the proposed answers, or else, the very same option is proposed several times in different ways. Unless one has taken a preparatory survey, one is never sure of having foreseen the whole range of possible responses. One can thus anticipate a repetition of certain answers giving a greater chance to the answer which has been proposed more than once; or else, among the answers anticipated, one can omit a particularly important possible question, thus taking away the likelihood of a certain answer appearing.

THE INEVITABLE PROBLEMATICS

I therefore think that there are biases of this kind and it would be interesting to investigate the social conditions underlying their appearance. The sociologist supposes that nothing happens just by chance and that these biases can be explained. Most of the time they are related to the work conditions of the people who produce the questionnaires. However, there are other factors as well. The fact that the problematics devised by the polling institutes are subordinated to a specific kind of demand; any investigation of the generating principles behind these problematics must ask who can afford to pay for an opinion poll.

Recently, we undertook an analysis of a large national survey on the French people's opinion of the education system, which was based on a random sample of answers given in reply to a questionnaire published and distributed in the French newspapers. To control the validity of our sample, we looked through the files of a number of research institutes, notably IFOP (Institut Française d'Opinion Publique) and SOFRES (Société Française des Enquêtes par Sondage), for all the questions dealing with education. We found that more than two hundred questions on the education system were posed since May 1968, compared with less than twenty between 1960 and 1963. This indicates that the problematics which are imposed by this kind of organization are closely linked to the socio-political conjuncture and are dominated by a specific kind of social demand. In other words, the problems posed are political problems. The question of education, for instance, cannot be posed by a public opinion institute until it becomes a political problem. The difference can be immediately noted between these research institutes and those which generate their own problematics, if not out of a clear blue sky, at least with a much greater distance from a direct and immediate social demand.

A summary statistical analysis of the questions asked in this survey showed us that the great

majority of them were directly linked to the political preoccupations of the "ruling power." If we were to amuse ourselves right now by making a list, and if I were to ask you to write the five questions which you feel are most important in the field of education, we would surely receive a very different list from those actually asked by the opinion polls. The question "Should politics be introduced into the secondary schools?" (or variations on the theme) was asked very often, whereas the question "Should the curricula be modified?" or "Should there be a change in the way classes are taught?" was very rarely posed. Questions of major importance, at least from another perspective.

THE FUNCTION OF THE POLLS

The problematics proposed by the opinion polls correspond to specific interests. Any problematic can be said to correspond to specific interests, but in this particular case the interests which support these problematics are political interests, and this fact governs both the meaning of the responses and the significance which is given to their publication. The opinion poll is, at the present time, an instrument of political action; its most important function is perhaps to impose the illusion that a public opinion exists, and that it is simply the sum of a number of individual opinions. It imposes the idea for instance that in any given assembly of people there can be found a public opinion, which would be something like the average of all the opinions or the average opinion. The "public opinion" which is stated on the front page of the newspapers in terms of percentages (60% of the French are in favor of...) is a pure and simple *artefact* whose function is to conceal the fact that the state of opinion at any given moment is a system of forces, of tensions, and that there is nothing more inadequate than a percentage to represent the state of opinion.

We know that relations of force can never be reduced to relations of force: any exercise of power is accompanied by a discourse aimed at legitimating the power of those who exercise it. One could even say that there is a tendency in the exercise of power towards its self-concealment as such, and that complete power is only realized when it is fully concealed. Stated simply, the politician who yesterday said "God is on our side" today says "Public Opinion is on our side."

This is the fundamental effect of the opinion poll: it creates the idea that a unanimous public opinion exists in order to legitimate a policy, and strengthen the relations of force upon which it is based or make it possible.

THE "NO REPLIES"

Having stated my purpose at the beginning, I shall try to quickly indicate the operations which produce this *consensus effect*. The first operation, which begins with the assumption that everyone must have an opinion, consists in ignoring the "no replies." For some time now, instead of saying "50% of the French are in favor of the discontinuation of the railroads," the newspapers say

"50% of the French are for, 40% are against, and 10% have no opinion." But that isn't enough information; for instance, you ask people "Are you favorable to the Pompidou government?" You register 30% "no replies", 20% yes, 50% no. You can say the number of people unfavorable is greater than the number of people favorable and there is a remainder of 30%; or you can re-calculate those favorable and those unfavorable, excluding the "no replies". This simple choice is a theoretical operation of great importance about which I would like to reflect a moment.

Eliminating the "no replies" is the same as what is done in an election when there are blank or null ballots; the implicit philosophy of electoral surveys is thus imposed on opinion polls. On close examination, however, one finds that the rate of "no replies" is generally higher in women than in men, and that the margin between men and women increases as the problems posed become more specifically political. This is true to such an extent that we were able to determine, out of a list of different questions, which ones could best be considered political, just by evaluating the margin between the "no replies" by women and men. Another factor: the more a question concerns problems of knowledge, the greater is the margin of "no replies" between more-educated and less-educated people. Another observation: when the questions have to do with ethical problems (example: "Should children be punished?") the margin of "no replies" between social classes is slight. Another observation: the more a question poses conflictual problems, concerns a "thorny" contradiction (such as a question on the situation in Czechoslovakia for persons who vote Communist) or generates tensions for a particular category, the more "no replies" will be received from that category. In other words, a simple statistical analysis of the "no replies" offers information about the meaning of the question, as well as the category of people questioned, the category being defined as much by the *probability of having an opinion at all* as by the conditional probability of having a favorable or unfavorable one.

THE IMPOSITION OF THE PROBLEMATIC

The scientific analysis of opinion polls shows that there exists practically no catch-all problem: no question which is not reinterpreted in function of the interests or non-interests of the people to whom the question is posed. Thus the first imperative in evaluating a poll is to ask what question the different categories of people thought they were answering. One of the most pernicious effects of the opinion surveys is to put people in a position where they must answer a question they have never thought about, or mistakenly answer a different question from that which was asked, the interpretation only being a record of the misunderstanding.

I stated earlier that the opinion polls could be re-used scientifically; however, this supposes certain precautions which are excluded because of the social conditions under which the research

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organizations operate. Journalists who want things to be simple, further simplify the already simplified data which they have been given, and when it reaches the public, it is likely to read as follows: "50% of the French are for the discontinuation of the railroads." A rigorous interpretation of the opinion polls would require an epistemological examination of each of the questions asked, plus, concerning the system of the answers, an analysis of the whole system of answers, which together would be the only way to know what were the questions the people really thought they were answering.

Questions having to do with moral issues, for example, the punishment of children, relations between teachers and students, and so on, are problems which are perceived as ethical problems as one descends the social hierarchy, but which can be political problems for the upper classes. One of the distorting effects of surveys is the transformation of ethical responses into political responses by the simple imposition of a particular problematic.

THE TWO PRINCIPLES IN THE PRODUCTION OF OPINIONS

In fact, there are several principles which can be used to generate a response. First of all, there is what could be called "political competence," a notion which corresponds to a definition of politics which is both arbitrary and legitimate, both dominant and concealed as such. This "political competence" is not universally distributed. It varies with the level of education. In other words, the probability of having an opinion on all the questions which presuppose a certain political knowledge can be compared to the probability of going to a museum; it is a function of a person's level of education. Some astounding variations can be observed: whereas a student involved in a far-left movement perceives forty-five different divisions to the left of the Parti Socialiste Unifié, a middle-level executive sees none at all. In an election, one thinks in terms of the political gradations far left, left, center left, center, center right, right, far right, etc. One of the important facts we found as a result of a test we developed was that difference social categories would use this scale in a very different way from that taken for granted by "political science" investigations. Certain social categories use very intensely a small section of the far left; others use only the center, while still others use the whole range; an election turns out to be the aggregation of totally different spaces; those people who measure in centimeters are added together with those who measure in kilometers, or to use a better image, those who use a scale of 0 to 20 with those who use only 9 to 11. Competence is measured, among other things, by the degree of finesse of one's perception (the same is true of aesthetics, where some people can distinguish five or six stages in the development of a painter). This comparison can be pushed even further. Just as in aesthetic perception, there is a prerequisite: people must first think of the work of art as a work of art, and once they have done so, they must create

perceptual categories to construct and structure it, etc.

Let us suppose a question formulated in the following way: "Are you for a structured education or a non-structured education?" It can be constituted as a political question, the representation of the teacher-child relationship being integrated into a systematic vision of society. It can be considered as a political question by some people; for others it is strictly a moral question. In the questionnaire which I mentioned earlier, we asked people "For you, is it political or not to go on strike, wear long hair, participate in a rock festival, etc?" We wanted to see just how people use this dichotomy; obviously one finds very great differences according to social class.

The first condition for the production of opinions is thus to be able to perceive a question as being political; the second, once having established it as being political, is to be able to apply political categories to it, categories which may be more or less adequate, more or less refined, etc. These are the specific conditions for the production of opinions which the opinion surveys assume to be universally and uniformly fulfilled when they first postulate that everyone can produce an opinion.

The second principle according to which people produce an opinion is what I call "class ethos" (not to be confused with "class ethic"), by which I mean a system of implicit values which people have interiorized from childhood and from which they generate answers to very different types of questions. An example: I think the opinions which people exchange at the end of a soccer game between Roubaix and Valenciennes owe a great deal of their coherence and logic to a class ethos. Judgements like "It was a beautiful game, but too rough" or "It was well-played, but not very beautiful to watch," which appear to be arbitrary, like tastes and colors, are probably generated by a very systematic principle, a class ethos.

THE DISTORTION OF MEANING

Many answers which are considered political answers are in reality produced by a class ethos and can be given a totally different meaning when they are interpreted on political grounds. I shall illustrate this and you will see that what I have said is far from abstract and unreal. Here I must refer to a specific sociological tradition, prevalent especially among political sociologists in the United States, who commonly speak of the conservatism and authoritarianism of the popular classes. These ideas are based on a comparison of the international results of surveys or elections which tend to show that each time the popular classes are asked, in any country, about problems concerning relations of authority, individual liberty, freedom of the press, etc., they give answers which are more authoritarian than the other classes; so the global conclusion is made that there is a conflict between democratic values and the authoritarian and repressive values which have been interiorized by the popular classes (the author I have in mind, Lipset, refers to American democratic values). Thus the following

eschatological vision is arrived at: if we raise the standard of living and level of education, we will reduce the propensity to repression and authoritarianism, etc., which are linked to low income and low level education, etc., and we will thus produce good citizens of American democracy and will do away with Communist parties like they have in France or Italy. It appears to me that the crux of the problem is the meaning of the answers to certain questions. Imagine a group of questions like the following: "Are you for the sexual independence of married couples?", "Are you in favor of a non-repressive education?" "Are you in favor of the new society?" Now imagine another type of question, like: "Should professors go on strike when their jobs are threatened?", "Should teachers act in solidarity with other civil service employees during periods of social conflict?" These two groups of questions receive replies structured inversely in relation to social class. The first group of questions, which deal with a certain kind of change in social relations, or shall we say, in the symbolic form of social relations, provokes responses which are increasingly favorable as one ascends the social hierarchy and the hierarchy in the level of education; inversely, the questions which deal with real transformation of the relations of force between classes provoke increasingly unfavorable answers as one ascends the social hierarchy.

Thus the statement "The popular classes are repressive" is neither true nor false. It is true to the extent that the popular classes tend to have a much more rigid and authoritarian idea about moral problems concerning relations between parents and children or between the sexes. Concerning problems of political structure, which brings into play the maintenance or transformation of the social order, and not just the conservation or transformation of the modes of relationships between individuals, the popular classes are much more favorable towards a transformation of the social structure. We have seen how certain problems posed in May 1968, and often poorly posed, in the conflict between the Communist party and the leftists, is intimately linked to the central problem which I have just tried to present, concerning the nature of the answers people give in reply to the questions asked, that is, the principle upon which they produce their answers. The opposition I made between these two groups of questions actually amounts to the opposition between the two principles in the production of opinions: an authentically political principle and an ethical one, and the problem of the conservatism of the popular classes is produced because this difference is ignored. Thus, what I have called the effect of imposition of the problematic, an effect utilized by all opinion polls and political investigations (beginning with elections), results from the fact that the questions asked in an opinion survey are not the questions which are a real concern for the people questioned, and the responses are not interpreted in function of the problematic used by different categories of respondents in their actual reply. Thus the dominant

problematic, whose image is provided by the list of questions posed during the last two years by the polling institutes, is the problematic which essentially interests the people who hold power and who consider themselves to be well informed about the means of organizing their political action. This problematic is very unequally overcome by the different social classes and it is important to note that the different social classes are more or less apt to produce a counter-problematic. Concerning the reaction to a television debate between Servan-Schreiber and Giscard d'Estaing, a polling institute posed questions like "Is success a function of talent, intelligence, work, personal worth?" The answers received revealed nothing about objective truth, but did, in fact, reply to the question "To what extent are the different social classes conscious of the objective laws governing the transmission of cultural capital?" It could be said generally that the lack of consciousness of these laws increases as one descends the social hierarchy, and in the present state of society, the popular classes are particularly mystified by the school system. One can understand why the attachment to the myth of talent, of rising through the school system, of the impartiality of the school system, of the equity in the distribution of jobs according to skills, etc., is very strong in the popular classes. There is no counter-problematic; it can exist for a few intellectuals but it does not have social force even though it has been taken up by a few parties and groups. The popular classes are thus not conscious of the truth of the mechanisms and they cannot produce a counter-problematic: the whole ensemble of social conditions prohibits it being diffused. We might add that it is not enough for a party to put into its program the struggle against the hereditary transmission of cultural capital; "scientific truth" is subject to the same laws of diffusion as ideology. A scientific proposition such as "cultural capital is transmitted by the school and by the family" is like a papal bull on birth control: one is only preaching to the converted. It is diffused according to certain laws; the probability that it will be accepted by some and rejected by others can be determined sociologically.

MÖBILIZED OPINION

The idea of objectivity enters into an opinion survey by asking questions in the most neutral terms so as to give equal chance to all possible answers. In reality one could ask if the most perfectly rigorous opinion survey is not one in which the imperatives of neutrality and scientific objectivity are overridden entirely. Rather than asking "Some people are in favor of birth control, others against; how about you?...", it would provide a series of explicit positions taken by groups elected to establish and diffuse opinions, so that people could place themselves not in relation to a question to which they must invent both an answer as well as a problematic, but in relation to problematics and responses which have already been prepared. In other words, the opinion survey would be closer to reality if it totally violated the rules of objectivity and gave people the means to

situate themselves as they really do in real practice, in relation to already formulated opinions. As a hypothesis, imagine at a given moment a problem like teaching where all the courses are known in advance. A content analysis of the general press, the trade union press, the political press, etc., would be the basis for a sort of map which would contain all the known positions. Anyone who proposes a position which is not on the map would be considered eclectic or incoherent. Every opinion is objectivity situated in relation to a series of known positions. One commonly speaks of "taking a position"; the expression must be understood in its strongest sense; the positions are there before us and we take them. But we do not take them haphazardly. We take the positions which we are predisposed to take in function of our position in a certain domain. For example, in the intellectual domain, at a given moment, we can say that an individual, given the particular circumstances, has a certain probability of taking one position rather than another. Obviously there is a small margin of freedom, but there are positions which are posed with greater immediacy and force. A rigorous analysis of ideologies should seek to explain the relation between the structure of positions to be taken and the structure of the range of positions already objectively occupied.

I arrive now at the problem of the forecast value of opinion surveys. We know that opinion surveys, except for certain accidents, have a very high forecast rate regarding elections, but they seem to fail when one compares an early result with a later one, whenever there has been an intervening crisis. In other words, the opinion surveys capture quite well the structure of opinions at a given moment, in a stable situation, but they do not capture the potential state of opinion, and more exactly, the movement of opinion. This occurs because they capture opinions in a situation which is not the real situation in which opinions are formed, and because they perceive the opinions themselves and not the ongoing conditions which produce them. There is a considerable difference between the opinion which people produce in an artificial situation such as a survey and the opinion they produce in a situation closer to the daily-life situation in which opinions are confronted and confirmed, such as conversations among people of the same milieu, etc. Thus, in a psychological experiment, we asked ten people to state their opinion on the length of two pieces of metal, which were in fact the same length. Afterwards, we took nine of the people aside and asked them to say that the two pieces of metal were not exactly the same length. Then we asked all the ten people the same question a second time, and found that the tenth person now says that at first he thought that the two pieces were the same length, but now it seems to him that they're not exactly the same length, etc. The situation in which opinions are formed, in particular in times of crisis, is of this type; people are faced with already formed opinions, opinions upheld by certain groups and they must choose between opinions because they must choose between groups. This is the principle behind the

politicizing effect produced by a crisis: one must choose between groups who define themselves politically and who increasingly define their position in function of explicitly political principles. The important thing is that the opinion survey treats public opinion like the simple sum of individual opinions, gathered in an isolated situation where the individual furtively expresses an isolated opinion. In real situations, opinions are forces and relations of opinions are conflicts of forces. Taking a position on any particular problem means choosing between real groups, which leads us to see that the second postulate, the assumption that all opinions are equal, is totally unfounded.

Another law can be deduced from our analysis: the more one is involved in a certain problem, the more one will be interested in it and the more opinions one will have about it. Going back to the example of the education system, we find that the rate of response is very closely related to one's personal proximity to the education system, either as an employee, professor, parent or former student, and the probability of one's having power over the issue in question. Mobilized opinion is the opinion of influential people. If the Minister of Education acted in function of an opinion poll (or even a superficial reading of a poll), he would not do what he does when he acts really as a politician, in response to the telephone calls, the visit from the director of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, or from a dean, etc. In reality he acts much more in function of forces of actually formed opinion, which enter his field of vision only to the extent that they have power, because they have already been mobilized.

INCLINATIONS AND OPINIONS

In order to forecast, for example, what will happen to the university system in the next ten years, I think that the understanding of *mobilized opinion* is essential. However, at the same time a reading of the opinion survey can also help us to discover something which does not yet exist in the state of an opinion and which can suddenly emerge in a time of crisis. By opinion I mean propositions which are formulated in a coherent discourse. Do those people who do not answer or who say they have no opinion really have no opinion? I think that taking the "no replies" seriously means that the inclinations of certain categories of people cannot attain the status of opinion, that is, the status of a formulated discourse which aims at coherence, and intends to be heard, imposed, etc. In crisis situations, where formulated opinions are expressed, people who had no opinion will not choose one haphazardly. If they perceive the problem as being political (for workers, questions of salary or of work cadences), they will choose in terms of political competence; if the problem is one which they do not perceive as being political for them (repressive relationships within the company) or if the problem is not yet clearly perceived, they will choose by what is called class instinct, but which has nothing to do with instinct: it is a system of deeply unconscious inclinations which is the principle behind innumerable choices in extremely different areas ranging from

aesthetics to everyday economic decisions. The traditional opinion surveys produce the bizarre effect of destroying simultaneously both the study of pressure groups and opinion, and the study of dispositions which cannot be expressed in the form of an explicit discourse. That is why the opinion survey, in its present use, is incapable of generating any kind of reasonable prediction about what would happen in a crisis situation.

OPINION POLLS AND ELECTIONS

Let us imagine a problem like the education system. We could ask: "What do you think of the policies of [the Minister of Education] Edgar Faure?" This type of question is very much like an electoral survey in that the answer doesn't tell us very much. We could then go on and ask: "Are you in favor of bringing politics into the high schools?" Here we find a very clear division; but even so, within the upper classes, it's more complicated; the intellectual fractions of these classes tend to be in favor, but with reservations. If we follow with another question: "Can teachers go on strike?", we find a sharp division in the answers. Among the popular classes there is a kind of transfer of specific political competence and people know exactly what to say. We could also ask "Should the curricula be transformed?" "Should grades be based on final exams?" "Should parents be represented on teachers' councils?" Should competitive exams be done away with?, and so on. Behind the question "What do you think of the policies of Edgar Faure?" there were all these other questions, and people immediately took a position based on something which a good questionnaire could only grasp if it used at least sixty questions, whose variations in every direction could then be observed. In the case of one type of question, the opinions would be related positively to the position in the social hierarchy, and in another, they would be related negatively, or perhaps just a bit, or up to a certain point, or even not at all. Thus, when one asks a general question like the one about Faure one accumulates phenomena which are related in very different ways to social class. What is interesting is that specialists in political sociology have noticed that the relationship between social class, and practices and opinions, etc. which is usually observed in almost every area of social practice, is very weak when it comes to electoral phenomena, to the degree that some of them do not hesitate to conclude that there is no relation whatsoever between social class and the fact of voting for the right or for the left.

In reality, if we keep in mind that an election poses in a single syncretic question what can only be reasonably understood in two hundred questions, and that some people measure in centimeters and other in kilometers, along with so many other variables, one will realize that the act of voting is a question of chance. Perhaps the traditional question of the relationship between voting and social class should be posed in the opposite way: why is there in spite of everything, a relationship at all, even a

weak one? Why does it not simply follow a distribution curve? There is a very great elasticity in electoral opinions: the opinion expressed by a vote is defined in an essentially negative way; there are points beyond which one cannot pass, yet within these defined limits, there is a certain leeway. This is all the more true when the strategy of electoral campaigns is to obscure the questions and conceal the differences between candidates in order to win undecided votes. All this leads one to ask what is the function of both the electoral system and the opinion surveys, whose properties are so similar. To put things in very gross terms, I believe that the electoral system is an instrument whose very logic tends to attenuate conflicts and differences, and thus naturally tends to be conservative. We can ask ourselves what we are really doing when we use this instrument. One could draw the conclusion, perhaps, that it is really better than we think and we should continue to use it. A revolutionary party which wants to increase its strength in the existing relations of force, based on this analysis, can develop counter-problematics as its main strategy, systematically using the procedure instinctively used for generations (the counter-strategy of "its the same difference" as a refusal of the problematic). The problem of a party which has defined its objectives is not to provide answers but to provide people with the means of being the producers, not of their answers, but of their questions, and in doing so produce their means of defense against questions which are imposed upon them simply because they do not have any others.

In another perspective, it could be concluded that just as people must be taught certain things in school before they can go to a museum, if electoral contests are to be less absurd, the difference between the implicit postulates of the electoral system and reality must be as small as possible. In other words, people must have the means of producing opinions; they must therefore have the means to appropriate them. What this means is that from primary school on, people must have a real political education.

One might also be led to say: I do not want to play the electoral game because in the existing structure of society, with the present distribution of cultural capital being one of the factors which defines the capacity for producing opinions, it is an illusion to believe that equality can be achieved in the voting booth. It could be concluded that only active minorities are capable of mobilizing opinion. These very different conclusions could be drawn, among others. What is sure is that by studying the operation of opinion polls one gets an idea of the way this particular type of poll, the electoral survey, functions, and the effect it produces.

In brief, in saying that public opinion does not exist, I mean it does not exist in the form which some people, whose existence depends on this illusion, would have us believe. At present, there is, on the one hand, mobilized opinion, formulated opinion, pressure groups mobilized around a system of interests; and on the other, certain inclinations,

opinions in an implicit state which, by definition are not really opinions, if by opinion we mean a formulated discourse with a pretention to coherence. What I have been considering here is the definition of opinion which is implicitly used in the public opinion survey. It is not my opinion on opinion itself. It is only an explicit definition of opinion as it is employed by the people who produce the opinion polls when they ask people to formulate opinions or to take positions on already formulated opinions. This is what I mean when I say that opinion, the sense of the social definition implicitly accepted by those who prepare or analyze or use opinion polls, simply does not exist.

Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR)

ON JOURNALISM AND OBJECTIVITY

(Chile, 1971)

In capitalist society, the mass communication media serve the dominant classes. This is generally accomplished by an attempt to impose the supposedly eternal universality and validity of the bourgeois ideological worldview. The techniques developed by each of the communication media have been conditioned by mechanisms which assure the fulfillment of this ideological function. Furthermore, the communication media—especially in urban centers—have acquired a decisive importance in the coercive action of the dominant classes.

These observations have all become near-platitudes; nevertheless, any mass media discussion today must take them into consideration. As precarious and undeveloped as they may be, these considerations are important, since they not only challenge a particular form of action of the dominant ideology and the bourgeois media, but also directly concern the action and ideology of the media workers themselves. Furthermore, such a discussion poses the general problem of ideology, its nature and development and the techniques by which it is transmitted. The discussion is important, therefore, since it not only concerns the specific field of the newspaper worker, but because, in order to be adequately posed, presented and developed, it must also incorporate a more general problematic, one which transcends the area of journalism and confronts the framework of society as a whole, understood as the manifestation of human practices conditioned by the mechanisms of production.

Although this discussion of the media, the role of its workers and the sense of their possible transformation is in its first stages, certain basic concepts can be noted. To the extent that these concepts are introduced into the discussion in a concrete and creative way, a critical self-consciousness in journalistic practice may be furthered. Moreover, they hold the keys to an active and fruitful incorporation of the media and their workers into the political tasks which are advancing the struggle waged by the oppressed sectors of society for the achievement of economic, political and cultural liberation.

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Every social practice in bourgeois society has been invested with an ideological framework which justifies it, gives it meaning and tends to maintain its status in function of its position in the ensemble of social activities. Just as the concrete action of a psychiatrist, a writer or a politician have their nature and meaning assigned to them in bourgeois society, the practice of the workers in the communication media has been given its ideological basis, its particular social role and its general significance and direction.

One of the pillars of the bourgeois conception of journalism is what has been called "objectivity", a notion which has practical as well as moral implications. Throughout the history of journalism, the requisite of objectivity has been elaborated and proposed as a way of approaching reality, as a mechanism for transmitting this approach, and as a *desideratum*, the ultimate moral goal of the profession. Thus objectivity is not only a formal requisite for the isolated journalist: the journalist himself has come to accept his activity as a synonym for so-called objectivity.

Now, what is the nature of this objectivity?

First of all, it supposes the existence of an exterior reality which must be described "such as it is" by someone possessing the adequate skill.

Second, it implies that the viewpoint of the person responsible for the description is capable of selectively penetrating reality, discerning between what is important and what is in contingent, what is worthy of being described and what is not.

Third, it demands that the description be self-contained, in other words, that judgements between good and bad, for instance, not enter explicitly into the description. Any judgement would thus belong to the world of *effects*, the result of the reader's interaction with the description: journalism, therefore would be a practice of effects, and the objective description, rather than being responsible for the judgement would simply be the source of the individual reader's reflexion. According to this theory, the description of reality "such as it is" would act upon the individual consciousness which would be responsible for giving meaning to the description, lending it political value and interpreting it in terms of a particular conception of the world.

Fourth, regarding the technical aspects themselves, objectivity presupposes the elimination of the journalist's subjectivity, reserved exclusively for the process of selecting material and for his "intelligence" in discerning between what is important, what is "news", and what isn't. "Objectivity" also influences the practice of news production, and the norms determining how news is to be transmitted: a news item must be clearly written, detailed, stating the "how, where and why" of the event. The "how" and "where" imply the description of a particular event and a particular place. The "why", according to the demands of objectivity, must be presented only in terms of the opinions given by the event's protagonists and witnesses.

Fifth and lastly, objectivity responds to a

notion of the reader which is peculiar to a society in which the roles of individuals and groups are strictly assigned, and in which the division between manual and intellectual labor implies that only a select few are capable of generating ideas and communicating them while the majority can only receive the communication, even if these communications are alien to the events in which the receivers were actually the protagonists. In sum, it is a conception of passive readers, who are suited only to take in the news each new day so as to better forget the news of yesterday.

Why must we criticize this so-called objectivity? Because by analysing this notion point by point, it will lead us to some very concrete conclusions.

1. *Does there exist an exterior reality which can be described "such as it is"?* The only reality which men know is one which is modified by their consciousness, since the act of knowing corresponds to the arrangement of observable data by means of a highly complex, but thoroughly human and historical mechanism, present in every individual and corresponding to the society in which this individual lives and to his particular place in that society. *The idea that there exists an exterior reality whose facade can be perceived without any distortion or falsity is a conceptual error, but one which is a part of the ideology of class society, the ideology of the dominant class.* What exists is not an exterior reality, but a certain knowledge, a humanization of reality, produced by individual action and conditioned by the totality of society. Therefore no description, even the most strictly scientific and seemingly free from subjectivity can escape an ideological connotation. Since the ideology of the bourgeoisie, the dominant ideology in capitalist society, is a false consciousness, the bourgeoisie believes that it knows reality when it actually knows only the apparent reality of and for capitalist society. Likewise, the concepts of freedom, or nationality, or labor and capital are rationalized, ideologized by the bourgeoisie's need for domination: freedom means freedom of property, which is at the same time slavery for those who are not property-owners; nationality is the nationality of the economic and political interests of the national bourgeoisies, which simultaneously implies a negation of nationality whenever those interests transcend the national arena and become imperialist; labor is what capital makes possible, what the owners of the means of production allow the workers, even though, paradoxically, it is the labor of the worker which actually creates the existence of capital. Thus, as we said, the concept of objectivity is part of the ideological framework of the bourgeoisie. In opposition to this exterior reality, described "such as it is", there is a different reality, one in which the oppressed classes are the protagonists, a society in which they are excluded from power. In their search for their rightful hegemony, in the search to bring together their fundamental action and their mastery over society, they generate a new ideology, a new conception of the world, which is not objective, and does not want to be. It is the ideology of a world in transformation, in which the