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The Forming of Opinion

Marion CHOTTIN

When, and in what historical and conceptual context, did the notion of public opinion make an appearance? What theoretical role has it taken on? Can it be considered a concept, or is it among those words that are if not empty then at least ambivalent and volatile, and whose unmasking is incumbent upon philosophy?

Reviewed: Bertrand Binoche, *Religion privée, opinion publique* ["Private Religion, Public Opinion"], Paris, Vrin, "Moments philosophiques" ["Philosophical Moments"] collection, 2012, 232 pp., €12.50.

The theory behind *Religion privée, opinion publique* ["Private Religion, Public Opinion"] consists in establishing a causal link between the two terms that make up its title. According to Bertrand Binoche, the idea of public opinion constitutes the *effect* of the idea of private religion: it emerged, in the second half of the 18th century, not as a result or by accident, but essentially as its consequence. That consequence, while not necessary, is nonetheless logical: as soon as religion became a private affair and ceased to constitute the agreement that had long been seen as a requisite for constituting the civil link, and as soon as any substitute agreement (natural religion, natural morality) revealed its futility at the same time, only the theoretical and highly paradoxical solution remained, which consisted in basing society on the idea of disagreement governed by opinions in a state of perpetual evolution. The author thus tries to retrace the emergence of the concept of public opinion, its transformation into a "key term" (p. 126) and its gradual dissolution, from the wars of religion up to the second half of the 19th century.

A Genealogical Investigation

Given that, for Bertrand Binoche, the priority is to contribute not to the history of ideas (which limits itself to observing the historicity instead of thinking about it) but rather of concepts – a history that is, therefore, nothing more than one of the names for philosophy itself – his materials could only be textual: Locke, Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Condorcet, Kant, Chateaubriand, Constant, de Staël, Guizot, as well as Balzac and Maupassant, are the philosophers and men of letters of whom Bertrand Binoche, through long quotations with detailed commentary, reveals the dialogue that surrounds the problem – both general and historically situated – of the civil or social link: how can coexistence be guaranteed when the beliefs that should enable its foundation are in fact implacably diverse?

Through this history, the author shows that public opinion became the dominant concept from the 18th century onwards, and is still dominant now as the least evil or even the best possible solution to the problem. Moreover, the book in no way retraces the history of a forgotten concept: nowadays, public opinion is usually seen as the condition for effectiveness

of democracy, or as the very origin of this concept. In the evaluation he makes in the introduction to his book, Bertrand Binoche pinpoints the origin of this theory as the 1962 publication of Jürgen Habermas' celebrated work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. The German philosopher, inspired by an interpretation of the *Aufklärung*, itself inherited from Kant, was the first to specifically turn public opinion, conceived as a confrontation controlled by each person's knowledge, into the condition and very meaning of modern democracy. From this, Bertrand Binoche distinguishes three major critical orientations, which have in common the fact that they challenge Habermasian theory: that of historians, who endeavoured to show the multiple facets of a public opinion that philosophers have generally been too quick to hold up as a unified concept; that of Foucault and his followers, who highlighted the need to invert the terms of reflection and make public opinion not the new subject but rather the new object of politics; finally, that of sociologists who, following on from Bourdieu, have proclaimed the non-existence of any opinion other than that which is permanently created by those in positions of power. Bertrand Binoche conceives his work as a contribution to these contemporary debates, with the aim of completing existing work. Nevertheless, it is difficult to reduce it to something of that scale: *Religion privée, opinion publique* does its best if not to invalidate then at least to weaken, correct or else confirm the various theories that exist.

Tolerance and Its Paradoxes

The book has two parts, as indicated by its title. The first, entitled “Les paradoxes de la tolerance” [“The paradoxes of tolerance”] focuses on the rise of the private nature of the religious phenomenon, the cause of the emergence of the concept of public opinion. The second, entitled “Les équivoques de l’opinion publique” [“The ambivalence of public opinion”] moves away from the origin of the concept to deal with that of the expression according to its modern meaning, and describes the perils that threaten it. While the first part of the book might lead one to believe in the essential nature of the idea of public opinion, in so far as it seems to emerge mechanically from that of private religion, its second part, which points out both other possibilities and the reasons for its terminological prevalence, brings conjecture into the picture and opens up the future.

There are two “paradoxes of tolerance”, in so far as tolerance imposed itself as the only possible outcome of the wars of religion. According to the first (chapter I), which appeared with Locke and Bayle, peaceful coexistence, far from demanding that people agree on what matters to them at the very highest level (that is, our idea of life on Earth and the afterlife), only proves possible on the condition that this agreement is renounced. This is the idea of tolerance in its strictest sense, with which the idea of public opinion complies, and which should be distinguished from its looser meaning according to which the agreement of minds is a requisite for the civil link. The second paradox (chapter II) is as follows: those things on which we shall never agree belong to the realm of the incidental. More specifically, it is the tolerance of diversity of beliefs that has reduced them to the level of irrelevant options (and not the other way round, as one might think). However, if agreement on faith is not a requisite for social peace, then what is the basis of the civil link? In the first half of the 18th century, there was as yet no question of renouncing the idea that the social link was based on common thinking. This gave rise to the idea of tolerance in its looser sense, of which the most commonly accepted form during the Enlightenment stipulated that natural religion alone could constitute the agreement of minds that was required for the social link. Bertrand Binoche emphasises its nature as an “optimum compromise” (p. 60): the idea of natural

religion, strongly defended by Montesquieu as well as Voltaire and Rousseau, enabled the various religions to be given their legitimate place (inasmuch as they all accepted the existence of God and the immortality of the soul), while dismissing the atheists' idea of society, advocated by Bayle but deemed to be dangerous at the very highest level.

However, the solution through natural religion, as well as the more minority solution through natural morality (Holbalch's), had the drawback of renewing the idea of a common dogma, all the perils of which were focused in the wars of religion and against which tolerance had built up: the very futility of the idea of the agreement of minds gradually revealed itself. It was precisely then that the brilliant idea of public opinion emerged, from the pen of Constant in particular, understood as a confrontation between disagreements: what separates us is precisely what can unite us. After chapter III, which brings out three witnesses (Mme de Staël, Chateaubriand and Kant) of this Copernican reversal and whose developments might perhaps have deserved to fall within the implacably logical reasoning of the first part, Bertrand Binoche undertakes in the second part to trace the origin of the modern meaning of the term "public opinion" by means of an original approach, both semantic and conceptual, which he calls "philosophical philology" (p. 109).

Public Opinion: From Concept to Keyword

Throughout the 18th century, "public opinion" underwent a change in meaning as well as in status. Initially a synonym of either public esteem, or public confidence, or public voice, it was only during the second half of the century that the expression progressively came to refer to the "*immanent* process by which particular judgments come together to form a general judgment, which is destined to continually correct itself" (p. 132, chapter IV). While it managed to dominate its potential competition ("national opinion", "public thought", or even "general reason") in what Bertrand Binoche describes as a veritable battle of phrases (chapter V), it was "public opinion" that, according to the author, moved up from the rank of concept to that of "keyword", which distinguished itself from the former by the virtue it bestowed on ambiguity: the term "opinion" could refer to reason just as easily as to prejudice, and "public" could refer to the people as a whole or to its most enlightened members. Public opinion – which alone embodied the transition from "opinion only" (p. 119), devalued ever since Plato, to that which leads to the truth – succeeded in detaching itself both from its "simulacra", such as the "false opinion" denounced by Constant, and its "synonyms" which, like "public spirit", substantialised a subject of opinion that was specifically shifting in nature. As a tool for this "philosophical philology", Bertrand Binoche presents us with an annex containing a highly useful table in which he lists and classifies a good number of the terminological variations of public opinion, which was continuously evolving.

However, the origins – both conceptual as well as strictly lexical – of public opinion also indicate the dangers that lie in wait for it (chapter VI): that which takes the (public) place of religious belief cannot fail to be repeatedly threatened with becoming creed once again – more specifically, "doxo-politics" (p. 186) which can take and indeed takes three distinct forms in history: that of "instrumentalisation" (subordination of opinion to interests outside the public sphere such as partisan politics or money), "sedimentation" (dogmatic fixation), and "devaluation" (a descent into mere media parroting). Brought back to its cause, public opinion reveals the reasons behind its death: degraded to religion, it simply no longer exists. What its history tells us, therefore, is nothing more than the "impossible secularisation of social relations" (p. 214).

Rethinking the Social Link

Bertrand Binoche thus shows how public opinion developed from a concept into a “keyword”; however, he also describes the appearance of the relatively stable meaning the term still enjoys today. The multiple aspects of opinion as brought to light by historians therefore clouded a figure that it was up to philosophy to reestablish. The author then makes a clear decision to study the formation not of public opinion as an object but rather as a subject: as soon as it was a question of democracy, or more specifically of democratic possibilities, this option became a necessity. Finally, the philosopher adds a certain depth to sociological theory while both accepting and rejecting Habermas. Indeed, while he accepts the concept of public opinion, he does not give it a specific, defined correlation, instead showing how the idea is destined not to gain satisfactory fulfilment in experience: considering that the role given to public opinion was to substitute, as the social link, newly-private religion, it could not fail to transform into a creed itself and as such disappear. Hence the theory of its non-existence, which Bertrand Binoche partly accepts as the truth but which, for him, constitutes a way round the problem of the overlap between public opinion and modern democracy. Finally, while he may have perceived the specifically eighteenth-century origin of the concept, Habermas was mistaken when he saw public opinion as an agreement limited to discursive procedures: rules always carry some dogma, whether that be everyone’s capacity for discourse.

Religion privée, opinion publique is therefore a considerably more controversial book than might first appear. While some saw Communism as a new religion, and democratic debate as its antidote, Bertrand Binoche reveals the reduction *ad religiosam* of the modern-day high priestess of public opinion. The book reminds us of the liberal origin of a notion that is all too often concealed behind the veil of axiological neutrality; it opens our eyes to the way in which it is, by nature, a slogan and a new creed, and invites us to reflect on what it tends to conceal, that is, the constant, open possibility of a new social link.

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