Fermín Bouza

Academic routines and traditions respecting Public Opinion have always mixed two very different concepts whose empirical entity may, however, be less distinct. I have opted for calling one of the concepts (the one that entered the classic tradition of Public Opinion with the French conceptualization before and after the Revolution) the political concept of public opinion, and the other, born from the systematic application of the survey technique, the sociological concept of public opinion, more as a sign of respect for an illustrious legal-political tradition than from any real need.
conviction that such a difference exists (it does exist, undoubtedly, in the texts and in the reality of specialists’ academic conduct). The legal-political tradition has oscillated between a legitimating concept of democracy (“opinion regime”: guarantee of democracy) in which Public Opinion sometimes appears as “simple” popular or general opinion (a guarantee of democracy itself: a positivist concept) and at other times appears as a strange oppressive phenomenon above and beyond the individuals (Mill, Tönnies—who calls it a “strange force”), which is very negative. It depends on our historical distance from the French Revolution: the closer we get to the 20th century, the more the legal Public Opinion on which democracy was founded becomes a strange force created by the communications media. Neither of these two variations of the legal-political tradition is truly sociological. Other interesting variations (Habermas and his version of an ideal or normative Public Opinion, of which I will speak later, or Sartori, who uses a similar concept) join this tradition. The sociological tradition comes into being with the emergence of surveys and the Public Opinion Quarterly (1937). Since then, the legal-political tradition, so diverse (united only by the idea that surveys and “authentic” Public Opinion have very little in common), has not stopped insisting that this survey procedure is no good for understanding Public Opinion. Some of the arguments used have an objective interest, but in general they show an idea of Public Opinion that is impossible to define and that is not at all clear: a mixture of all of these matters that we have mentioned.

Floyd H. Allport, one of the founding fathers of Social Psychology, in an article in the first issue (1937) of the Public Opinion Quarterly, referred to The Confusion of Public Opinion with the Public Presentation of Opinion (The Journalistic Fallacy). This “public presentation of opinion” is what we have called “published opinion”, which some believe is analogous to Public Opinion. This journalistic fallacy of making Public Opinion and published opinion analogous is based on the idea (rather well founded, according to Allport).
although with important nuances in any strong enunciation) that the media seriously influence (totally and definitively, for those who fully accept the fallacy) the genesis of Public Opinion. Today we know that this is so in some complex way (as complex as the long and dense bibliography on media influence), and some of the theories that describe and explain the process, such as Agenda-Setting, have established the relationships among media, publics, politics, etc., rather precisely; this does not mean, however, that the disappearance of Public Opinion can be deduced from this proof. On the contrary, the complex dynamics of the media/public relationship speak of human activity at both poles (pressure, resistance, mutual influence), and, in the end, it takes us back to the central problem of man as a persuading animal and the consequences of this activity. But what obsessed Allport when he referred to Public Opinion (and tried to make the concept more precise) or to the concept of group\(^5\) (so central in psychosociology) was the construction of a methodological individualism that would elude any holistic temptation (collective Mind, Public, Public Opinion, Group, etc.) and would scientifically base the social sciences on the individual as the empirical atom. Thus, Public Opinion was a matter of individuals and it should be postulated about these individuals, not about the Public, the Mass\(^6\), or any such entities. In fact, Allport’s idea favors the conception of Public Opinion as the opinion that individuals give in surveys, because surveys do show us the individuals. Whether or not we add up these opinions and call the end result Public Opinion depends on certain theoretical perspectives and certain methodological limits that reality imposes\(^7\), but it also depends on certain consensuses, and the


\(^6\) “The manner of thinking in terms of the obsolete crowd-mind theory still persists”, says Allport at the beginning of his article on the fallacy of the group, cited in note 5.

\(^7\) In fact, sociologists have also discussed the limits of the survey procedure and have tried, with a certain amount of luck, to fill out knowledge about opinion by using qualitative procedures, such as discussion groups or focus groups. James S. Fishkin’s deliberative poll technique (see, for example: Democracy and Deliberation, Yale University, 1991, New Haven and London), or the formulations of Maxwell McCombs and others in The Poll with a Human Face (Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey and London, 1999) and other similar
consensus that (more or less) identifies surveys with Public Opinion is potent and widespread, even among its critics. At any rate, taking surveys as representative (in some debatable way) of so-called Public Opinion, does not necessarily mean that we are taking sides in the complex methodological battle between holists and individualists. The pragmatic considerations that lead scientists to choose one or the other in order to operationalize a concept do not necessarily imply serious methodological positions. As one of these scientists might say colloquially: it is just that we can approach it this way, and until there’s another way, we will follow this operative path.

Herbert Blumer held a very poor opinion of surveys, an opinion that has become a historical referent for all criticisms of surveys (they decontextualize the response outside of social life, in an individual act), but which does not explain the extraordinary efficacy of surveys for finding out about...Public Opinion? I have no problem in talking about Public Opinion and referring to survey results with this term. In fact, this has been the prevailing opinion, and it works with no great debate among social scientists. But from normativist positions, philosophers

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9 In supra, p.546 : "In short, we know essentially nothing of the individual in the sample with reference to the significance of him or of his opinion in the public opinion that is being built up or which is expressing itself functionally in the operation of society. We do not know whether the individual has the position of an archbishop or an itinerant laborer; whether he belongs to a powerful group taking a vigorous stand on the issue or whether he is a detached recluse with no membership in a functional group; whether he is bringing his opinion to bear in some fashion at strategic points in the operation of society or whether it is isolated and socially impotent. We do not know what role, if any, any individual in the sample plays in the formation of the public opinion on which he is questioned, and we do not know what part, if any, his opinion as given has in the functional public opinion which exists with reference to the issue."

10 "The standardized survey is the only method with which it is generally possible to obtain large and reasonably representative samples. Moreover, the standardized format means that results can be replicated and re-analyzed by
(Habermas\textsuperscript{11}) as well as politologists (Sartori\textsuperscript{12}) insist on the absurdity of the sociological fallacy of giving the name of Public Opinion to the uncultured opinions of people who are influenced by the communications media, as opposed to the authentic opinions that make up authentic Public Opinion in a well-structured society where citizens really have their own opinions.


I have already had the opportunity to criticize this in another article. I believe that these “mental” or ideal societies of the normativists are of little interest to sociologists, who are more obliged to talk about reality and more cautious as far as virtual fantasies and conceptual designs of this sort. I believe that Allport was right, beyond any methodological debate, in vindicating individuals, because they are the substance that forms any and every Society, Opinion or human activity; and they are, of course, clear empirical concepts, even though this must not exclude the use of theoretical concepts with any explanatory possibilities and any probability of being acceptably operationalized. Public Opinion may be one of these concepts.

13 Bouza, F. (2000). “Democracia y comunicación política: paradojas de la libertad”, Anales de la cátedra Francisco Suárez, Department of Philosophy of Law of the University of Granada, 34:9-27, p.22-23: “Autonomía versus heteronomía de la opinión pública. This is the title Giovanni Sartori gives to a very special section of one of his excellent books (Teoría de la democracia), in which statements are made about Public Opinion that are as remarkable and unacceptable, by my criteria, as the very similar statements made by Habermas in his Historia y crítica de la opinión pública; statements such as the requirement that certain ideal condition exist in order for public opinion to exist, because if not we only have something that is very secondary or trivial, in the banal sense that an opinion is public because it is located in the public (ob.cit, p.131). The custom of working scientifically with an excessive use of the ideal type methodology leads to this banalization or underestimation of what is real, and it seems that what people really think or express is only relevant in the ideal conditions that the observer determines. I suppose that this way of working has to do with the excessive presence of the legal perspective in many politological studies, and it is understandable from this original work perspective. But for a social scientist with a moderately observational (empirical?) formation, this kind of social jurisprudence (in the legislative terrain of what should be) is something different and, as such, it is acceptable; but it cannot in any case determine, through prescriptive prejudices, the investigation of things as they are or, at least, as they seem to be. Public opinion, naturally, is in the public, although a substantial part of the ideas that form it may come (and this is so difficult to know, scientifically) from outside. At any rate, wherever they come from and however ill-fated or imposed they may be, they are opinions of the public. But in these legal-type affirmations, there are ideas about social life that may be worth making explicit, and this is the most important one: people can form opinions on their own (to a certain extent, Sartori points out, however). This is only true, though, if we also understand that there is a social interaction that makes pure ideas unfeasible, and we therefore accept the commerce of ideas and mutual influence. But the Platonism (moderate in Sartori, more radical in Habermas) of believing that in the public there should only be things that are of the public in order for there to be true opinions does not seem to place itself within this perspective. This is similar to saying that something is impossible because the Constitution doesn’t allow it: it confuses legal frameworks with social realities. I do not know if I am being fair to the people I am criticizing (extraordinary thinkers, no matter what), but what we are risking here is, among other things, the meaning of sociology (understood correctly), far beyond a catalogue of good social intentions.”
In general, the attempts to define Public Opinion are interesting because of their very cultural expressiveness in a certain historical moment. Conceptual battles to define complex and not very well known phenomena are rather frequent and, in the end, a routine that everyone finally accepts imposes itself: we don’t really know what Public Opinion is, after these complicated debates, but we give the name Public Opinion to what surveys express numerically, that is, the numerical aggregate of public verbal behaviors as shown in responses to the questions on a questionnaire. We sociologists work with this data and it allows us to get to know man’s social behavior pretty well. This simplifies things, although nobody is resigned to it, much less those who define concepts before observing in depth the realities that they want to represent with these concepts. However, those who do this are not creating science, but values and norms, which must be necessary but cannot impregnate empirical work in such an extreme fashion. If Public Opinion were this kind of concept, created by some normativist in order for us to follow his rules of conceptual functioning, there would probably be no Public Opinion, there would only be the desiderata of someone who hopes that we will build reality according to the measure of his normative fantasies. In other words, if physicists had had to know how to define matter completely before they could investigate it, it would have been hopeless: there would be no physics. The problem of concepts (of the formation and use of concepts) is not, essentially, on the logical level, but on the empirical level: there is a complex conceptual genesis that does not entail a clear, full sense of the concept right from the beginning, and it sometimes never reaches one in this sense. This could bother a normative theorist, but it will never bother a scientist. In spite of how things may seem, the pretension of conceptual clarity is not an objective of contemporary science: a sort of pragmatism in the use of concepts has moved the focus of science from the problems of strict signification to the very reality that it studies, whether or not it knows how to clearly and precisely name this reality. At any rate, science names reality with sufficient clarity to continue working on it. And this pragmatism has saved science from those dense and terrible conceptual debates with which the old theologians kept
themselves busy. Something similar has happened with the concept of Public Opinion, and what began as a simple, clear concept (popular opinion, general opinion: what people say they think) began to get complicated when the criticism of the French Revolution and the posterior democratic processes turned into a criticism of what sustained these processes: popular opinion, thus also called Public Opinion, cause and effect of these historical changes. It was the *vox populi* transformed into political force or voting force. But this Public Opinion, which was the opinion of the masses\textsuperscript{14} (J.S.Mill\textsuperscript{15}), was also an unbearable force for

\textsuperscript{14} And it is always worthwhile to trace the conceptual and theoretical path to this tremendous concept of mass/masses, which at the same time as it expressed the urban concretion of the industrial and demographic revolution, with everything that went along with this, showed an elitist feeling of the loss of the premodern paradise among the illustrated minorities.

Salvador Giner’s different texts on this subject are very helpful for rethinking once more a concept that is decisive, clarifying, and harmful, all at the same time. I take the following characterization of *mass society* from one of these works: “With respect to the theory of mass society, in its ideal-type form, it can be said to present three groups of characteristics. In the first place, we find what could be called general properties of mass society: a lack. A lack of internal differentiation, the effect of a typically modern historical process of equalization or homogenization of any social body, which has received the name massification. In virtue of this, individuals become more and more similar to one another, more and more interchangeable. Two other phenomena, related to this one, appear: the atomization or fragmentation of society and the anonymity of its members, or the anonymity of its institutions, which lead to a state of diffuse, and therefore inexistent, responsibility. In mass society no one is guilty, there are only anonymous forces that push men into war, economic crises, or towards an unprecedented material well-being, as alienating as anything that happens in that society.” In Giner, S. (1971). *La sociedad masa: ideología y conflicto social*, Barcelona, Seminarios y Ediciones. p. 24.

\textsuperscript{15} Mill, J. S.(1869) *On Liberty*, Chap. III (http://www.bartleby.com/130/3.html): “In sober truth, whatever homage may be professed, or even paid, to real or supposed mental superiority, the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind. In ancient history, in the middle ages, and in a diminishing degree through the long transition from feudality to the present time, the individual was a power in himself; and if he had either great talents or a high social position, he was a considerable power. At present individuals are lost in the crowd. In politics it is almost a triviality to say that public opinion now rules the world. The only power deserving the name is that of masses, and of governments while they make themselves the organ of the tendencies and instincts of masses. This is as true in the moral and social relations of private life as in public transactions. Those whose opinions go by the name of public opinion, are not always the same sort of public: in America they are the whole white population; in England, chiefly the middle class. But they are always a mass, that is to say, collective mediocrity. And what is a still greater novelty, the mass do not now take their opinions from dignitaries in Church or State, from ostensible leaders, or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers. I am not complaining of all this. I do not assert that anything better is compatible, as a general rule, with the present low state of the human mind. But that does not hinder the government of mediocrity from being mediocre government.”
people who mistrusted this new mass mobilization of postrevolutionary and premodern society. This Public Opinion was criticized from very elite positions, and an entire theory of authentic and desirable Public Opinion was built on this (Habermas, but also C.W. Mills and his mass/public dualism, a public that, according to what Mills says, must only have existed among extremely limited elites, that in no way define a society), beyond the common thought that the population adopts and that is strongly marked by the communications media and other spurious things (Tocqueville, Mill, Tönnies, Ortega, Mills, Habermas, Sartori...). The sociological and demosscopic pretension (Gallup, Roper, etc.) of capturing opinion in surveys was severely criticized, even by sociology. But no one knows any more precise procedure for finding out about opinion (popular, general, public), even though we realize its limitations (see note 7).

Even though the sociological version of the concept did, in fact, impose itself, the most general reflection on the contents of the concept was made in such theoretical or abstract terms that there was no way to connect such a dense and plurimodal concept of Public Opinion with any human method of acquiring knowledge: it turned into a legal concept of doubtful obviousness, but well received by the normative sciences. A concept outside of all reality: an excuse to talk about everything and about nothing, which is how maltreated concepts of this kind end up. This was one of the causes of the decadence of Public Opinion studies and of the odd idea that, from now on, we would have to talk about Political Communication, as if there had been an unexplainable substitution of one concept for

16Mills C.W. (1957). The Power Elite, Cap. 13 (http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Book_Excerpts/MassSociety_PE.html): “(...) the classic community of publics is being transformed into a society of masses. This transformation, in fact, is one of the keys to the social and psychological meaning of modern life in America. (...). In the democratic society of publics it was assumed that after determining what is true and right and just, the public would act accordingly or see that its representatives did so. In the long run, public opinion will not only be right, but public opinion will prevail. This assumption has been upset by the great gap now existing between the underlying population and those who make decisions in its name, decisions of enormous consequence which the public often does not even know are being made until well after the fact.”
another similar, but not coinciding, one. But Public Opinion studies are once again being called for at the forefront of the social sciences from different perspectives.\footnote{The unfolding of the crisis of Public Opinion studies is very interesting, as described in Weakliem, D. L. (2003). “Public Opinion Research and Political Sociology”, Research in Political Sociology, Volume 12, edited by B.A. Dobratz, Iowa State University, Ames, USA.}

The science of Public Opinion, its scientific and systematic study, is returning hand in hand with certain explanatory needs, and is linked more and more directly to government by polls or to the influence of opinion polls in governmental politics, as the sociologist Juan Jesús González summarizes the matter (referring to the Clinton government in the USA) in his article (see note 19). But it is also linked to other important matters such as those cited by Weakliem in his interesting work (see notes 10 and others). Critical approaches to the survey/public opinion relationship, are not lacking, logically, because surveys show numerous issues.\footnote{Weakliem, D. L. Ob.cit.}

\footnote{...we should not forget two of the conditions that made Clinton’s extraordinary plasticity possible: a long tradition of public opinion government and a political system characterized by the weakness of the parties and their absolute incapability of imposing discipline on their members (the exact two things to which Jacobs and Shapiro haven’t paid enough attention). This may make the eventual exportation of this kind of experience more difficult. One thing, however, seems to be beyond discussion: the starring role that polls play in the everyday matters of democracy. The Clinton experience has provided us with an excellent illustration of the two possible ways of using polls. If I may take the liberty, I would like to finish off in an old-fashioned way: ‘by their polls you will know them.’” In González, J.J. (2001). “Los sondeos de Clinton y las paradojas de la democracia”, Empiria, Num. 4, Revista de la UNED, Madrid, pp.55-56.}

\footnote{Public opinion polls appear to be a more inclusive form of representation than traditional forms of political participation. However, under certain circumstances, aggregate public opinion may be a poor reflection of collective public sentiment. I argue that it may be difficult to gauge true aggregate public sentiment on certain socially sensitive issues. My analysis of NES data from 1992 reveals that public opinion polls overstate support for government efforts to integrate schools. Specifically, selection bias models reveal that some individuals who harbor anti-integrationist sentiments are likely to hide their socially unacceptable opinions behind a “don’t know” response. As an independent confirmation of the selection bias correction technique, I find that the same methods which predict that opinion polls will underestimate opposition to school integration also predict the results of the 1989 New York City mayoral election more accurately than the marginals of pre-election tracking polls.” In Berinsky, A. J. (1999). “The Two Faces of Public Opinión”, American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 43, No. 4, October 1999, pp. 1209–1230.}
descriptive weaknesses which must be supplemented with parallel studies, and this does not affect the substance of their function in Public Opinion studies. In fact, the challenge to questionnaires tends more towards Cool Cognition than towards Hot Cognition, but, in the area of electoral surveys, the campaigns bring forth hot cognitions (not always, sometimes the opposite occurs, depending on the campaign design) and introduce emotion as a factor of vote volatility that is not easily controlled for in surveys. Emotion\textsuperscript{21} comes into play and opens new fields of investigation to explain changes, nuances, ruptures, etc., in Public Opinion\textsuperscript{22} and in the cognitive processes that sustain it\textsuperscript{23}. On the other hand, questionnaire design approaches the new cognitive methodologies\textsuperscript{24}, and this growing sophistication in techniques is substantially improving our knowledge of Public Opinion, where there is no longer any place for simplistic attitudes in any of the traditions that breathe life into the concept.

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\textsuperscript{22} In March, 2003, the Shambaugh Conference on Affect and Cognition in Political Action, was celebrated at the University of Iowa. This is an event in which the kinds of things that affect cognitive processes in the political area and deflect them from a purely rational model, a Cool model, depending on the theoretical perspective within which we situate ourselves, have a central role. Evidently, the study of Public Opinion is not limited to the statistical treatment of survey data, no matter how relevant and necessary this is.
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Mills C.W. (1957). La élite del poder, México, FCE. (ed.or: 1956). Translation by F. Torner and E. de Champourcin. (the quotes in English have been taken from the footnote versions)


