British Political Culture and the Idea of 'Public Opinion', 1867-1914

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From the late 1960s, the methods and claims of ‘conceptual history’ – although perhaps not Begriffsgeschichte – have fruitfully informed the scholarship of historians working on early-modern British and ‘Anglo-world’ political thought. Conceptual history has had comparatively less influence over historians of Victorian and Edwardian political thought (although Stefan Collini’s work on ‘character’ and John Burrow’s Carlyle lectures – published as Whigs and Liberals – stand out as important exceptions). Recently, this has begun to change. With the death of the short-lived ‘linguistic turn’, and given the continuing commitment among Victorianists to fleshing out all aspects of 19th-century ‘political culture’, historians of modern British political thought have finally begun to take conceptual history seriously. The past few years has seen the publication of scholarship which traces the history of ‘political’ concepts in both domestic and imperial contexts. Peter Mandler’s the English National Character, for instance, has taken as its subject a ‘slippery and flexible’, and of course highly politicized, concept which, during the 19th and 20th centuries, was ‘constantly contested and reinterpreted by a wide range of social actors and from a wide range of ideological; positions’. (1) Andrew Sartori, meanwhile, has given a (partially) Kosellekian account of 19th-century British Bengal’s embrace of the political concept of ‘culturalism’. (2) James Thompson’s British Political Culture and the Idea of ‘Public Opinion’, 1870–1914, with its Skinnerian commitment to ‘elucidating the ideational context in which, and rhetorical purpose for which’ contemporaries deployed the concept of ‘public opinion’, comprises an important contribution to this ongoing conceptual turn (p. 12).

Public opinion was and is a compound concept. In the decades leading up the Great War, its meaning was informed by vigorous debates about both the character of ‘the public’ and the nature of ‘opinion’. The wide variety of late-Victorian/Edwardian views on exactly who belonged to ‘the public’ dovetailed with equally wide-ranging arguments over what constituted legitimate ‘opinion’. This interaction made ‘public opinion’ an exceptionally complex, volatile, and highly contestable concept. This compound, heterogeneous quality has been noted by other historians of ‘public opinion’. Thompson, however, claims that public opinion was also compound in a further respect which previous historians have ignored, or at least underappreciated. Namely, Thompson claims that public opinion was both a political and a social concept. This insight leads Thompson to look beyond the classic political texts produced by the canonical thinkers of the age, and to consider the wider social and cultural milieu in which and by which these texts were formed. This expansive
and inclusive perspective is one the book’s great strengths. Moreover, the range of sources on which Thompson draws to provide this expansive perspective is truly vast, and his handling of these sources is deeply impressive. In addition to providing close analysis of the ‘systematic’ work of late-Victorian/Edwardian intellectuals and public moralists, Thompson makes very full and sophisticated use of trade union publications, parliamentary papers, the popular press, and private papers. The comprehensiveness of Thompson’s source base enables him to shed much light on the pervasiveness and what one might call ‘social depth’ of debates over public opinion.

Given public opinion’s compound nature, Thompson wisely sets out first to locate ‘the public’. For the mid-Victorians, ‘the public’ was male, middle-aged, middle-class and urban. The classic articulation of this view was Bagehot’s characterization of the abstracted ‘bald-headed man at the back of the omnibus’. Later Victorian characterizations of the ‘man in the street’ as the embodiment of the public, while perhaps less class-bound, were similarly urban and male. Thompson sees little significance in the shift from the omnibus to the street and warns us against conceptualizing either rhetoric as advancing notions of a homogenized ‘average’ public. Rather, Thompson advances two alternative, and to a degree complimentary, late-Victorian/Edwardian conceptualizations of the public: the ‘consuming public’, and the ‘thinking public’. Thompson argues that the tendency to see the public as a body of consumers was widespread during this period and cut across both political and class boundaries, thereby creating a far more capacious sense of the public than those promoted by the rhetorics of the omnibus and the street. The ‘thinking public’ was a less inclusive category, founded as it was on the ability to mobilize political intelligence. Yet, it too extended far beyond the urban middle-class to include anyone who regularly read a newspaper or, in W. E. Gladstone’s words, was capable of ‘practical sense, generous feeling, quickness to learn, the spirit of trustfulness, and especially freedom from narrow interests’ (p. 60). Although the educated middle-class formed the core of this ‘thinking public’, in practice only the residuum was excluded. Crucially, interaction between these two accounts of the public’s composition created a contested expansion of the public’s imagined scope throughout the period under consideration. Moreover, as education, and in particular opportunities for ‘political education’, and consumption became more widely diffused, these two conceptualizations of the public began to fuse. Nonetheless, Thompson is clear that the ‘consuming public’ view became especially potent and consensual at times of industrial unrest.

However ‘the public’ might be conceptualized, public opinion was both formed and disseminated chiefly via three channels, which Thompson refers to variously as the ‘constitutional triptych’ or ‘constitutional troika’ of the press, platform, and petition. These were the loci of public opinion throughout the 19th century, although, for obvious reasons, liberals tended to have greater faith in what Gladstone called ‘the three Graces … of progress and free government’. Of the three, petitions were, by the 1880s, perhaps the most problematic and least important locus of public opinion, but were also held up, mainly by liberals, as genuine and unmediated expressions of opinion. The press, meanwhile, was perceived, by liberals and conservatives alike, to be the most important tool in the development of opinion. Yet the precise role played by the press in advancing public opinion was subject to vigorous debate. In particular, contemporary commentators wrestled with the question of whether the burgeoning newspaper press mirrored or moulded opinion. Thompson argues that most late-Victorians acknowledged both roles, and understood this dual purpose as unproblematic. Attitudes toward the role of the press began to change from the early 20th century, as the Labour movement articulated its critique of the capacity of the post-Northcliffe press to mould public opinion as an end to promoting a narrow set of political and economic interests. In fact, as Thompson acknowledges, the newspaper press’s role in representing public opinion was highly politicized throughout the entire period under consideration. Liberals consequently tended to locate public opinion in the provincial press, whereas conservatives looked to the London dailies.

The platform was an equally politicized locus of public opinion. Liberals valorized the openness and ‘representativeness’ of the platform, while conservatives tended to question its validity by contrasting ‘the wisdom embodied in traditions and institutions with the clamour of manufactured opinion’ (p. 89). Carslake Thompson’s widely admired argument that legitimate public opinion should admit of four related qualities – persistence, volume, earnestness, and rationality – was seized on by conservatives who believed that the
platform, with it fleeting, ephemeral enthusiasms, displayed volume and earnestness, but failed the test of persistence and, perhaps, rationality. Yet conservatives did attempt to accommodate themselves to the rising importance of the platform in the context of the franchise debates of the mid-1880s. They did so by ticketing their public meetings so as to concentrate what they regarded as ‘respectable opinion’. Thompson nicely illustrates the conservative attitude toward the platform in his treatment of Salisbury’s account of ‘true’ public opinion. For Salisbury, as for any other conservatives, ‘true’ public opinion contrasted sharply with ‘mass opinion’, which he characterized as reactive, violent, clamorous, spasmodic, and excitable. True public opinion, Salisbury maintained, was the end product of a long process of considered and informed debate. It was, in other words, rational and reasonable. Importantly, this view was shared (although perhaps not wholesale) by liberals who invoked the language of ‘character’ to justify the influence of public opinion. As Thompson rightly argues, Gladstone’s vox populi was not an irrational ‘mass’ public. Although Tories were perhaps more worried than their liberal adversaries about the influence of public opinion, both groups sought a public defined by ‘national common sense’.

If the late-Victorian/Edwardian rhetoric of public opinion contrasted the ‘public’ and the ‘crowd’, it also contrasted the ‘public’ with the categories of social class. This was especially the case during the early 20th century, when, Thompson argues, public opinion came to be conceptualized as the ‘referee of last resort’ in industrial conflict (p. 184). This new role for public opinion as economic adjudicator came about as a result of three related processes unfolding throughout the 1870s and 1880s: the decline of wage fund theory, and the emergence of stronger trade unions, and the economic ‘crisis’ associated with relative industrial decline and agricultural depression. During the late 1880s and 1890s, liberal economists such as Alfred Marshall and H. S. Foxwell began to elaborate the view that only the influence of public opinion could resolve industrial disputes in a just and satisfactory manner. Moreover, it was as a body of consumers that the public would ensure just and sound resolutions. This view was surprisingly widely held.

Although the contributions of Marshall, Foxwell, and other political economists were important to this re-conceptualization of public opinion’s role in economic regulation, Thompson acknowledges that ‘a broader intellectual context is required that embraces wider currents in social and political thought’ (p. 207). It is here that Thompson brings the Labour movement to the center of his argument. At the height of the industrial disputes of 1911–12, while syndicalists and some populists emphasized the productionist interests of railway and coal workers, mainstream Labour figures instead characterized these workers as a class of consumers. Ramsay MacDonald in particular made repeated appeals to the status of workers as members of a consuming public, and in fact staked his argument for nationalization of the railways and coal on his contention that this would enhance the power of public opinion to regulate industrial relations. The mainstream Labour position was, in Thompson’s words, that ‘socialism would unite producers and consumers in a democratic commonwealth dominated by the reign of public opinion’ (p. 236). Thompson’s claim that public opinion fulfilled this crucial economic role is, to my mind, the most exciting and stimulating argument in a very stimulating book.

Thompson has written a fascinating book which will be indispensible for historians of Victorian and Edwardian political culture. In addition to shedding much light on topics ranging from contemporary views of crowd psychology to the emergence of historicist accounts of trade unionism, British Political Culture and the Idea of ‘Public Opinion’ is methodologically innovative. Thompson resists telling a linear ‘rise and fall’ story about public opinion. Instead, he presents a complex and variegated picture in which ‘more and less optimistic views of ‘public opinion’ could coincide and phases of pessimism could be and were succeeded by bouts of cheerfulness’ (p. 167) The jingoism of the Boer war, for instance, when an emotional and unreasoning crowd mentality was thought to have overwhelmed rational public opinion, does not, for Thompson, mark the terminal decline of public opinion. Rather, the ‘age of the crowd’ produced a temporary mood of pessimism among some of commentariat (especially on the left) about the legitimacy of public opinion. Others worried less about the wild public enthusiasms which seemed to have been stoked up by the yellow press. The public’s reputation was soon restored among those who had despaired in 1900, and perhaps declined somewhat among others who had not been so worried at the time of the Khaki election.
Although some might be put off by Thompson’s refusal to present a uniform, linear narrative, to my mind the book’s complexity is a source of great strength.

Notes

2. Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago, IL, 2008). Back to (2)

The author thanks Ben Weinstein for his careful reading of his book.

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