Public Opinion in Mass Society: Chances to Stir up "Silent Majority"

Liubov Bronzino
Department of Sociology
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
Miklukho-Maklay str., 10/2, Moscow, Russia, 117198
E-mail: lbronzino@gmail.com

Olga Maximova
Department of Foreign Languages
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
Miklukho-Maklay str., 10/2, Moscow, Russia, 117198
E-mail: maximova_ob@pfur.ru

Sofia Shatalina
Department of Social Philosophy
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
Miklukho-Maklay str., 10/2, Moscow, Russia, 117198
E-mail: ftremolo@ya.ru

Abstract—**This article dispels some of the most popular myths about the "knowledge society" and the delusions they create regarding intellectuals and intellectual activities. The analysis makes use of both research (M. McLuhan, M. Foucault, U. Eco, R. Collins) and literary (M. Bradbury) sources. Ideally, the reader should be tempted to arrive at a rather positive conclusion as regards the intrinsic ambivalence of knowledge and its live environment traditionally populated by intellectuals in our society.**

Keywords—public opinion; "silent majority"; mass society; manipulating public opinion; attitude towards adoption

I. INTRODUCTION

The ideas about depravity of masses and mass consciousness are more than half a century old. The Herbert Marcuse's "one-dimensional man" [1] capable of nothing but parroting primitive judgements instilled into him and bereft of perceiving himself as a unique personality, and the Ortega y Gasset's "mass-man" [2] "satisfied with himself exactly as he is," are the best known characters in a lengthy story of complaints about standardization and dehumanization of sociality that are so typical for the social thought of the 20th century. The apocalyptic sorceries of Jean Baudrillard seemed to settle this question: the mass is "an in vacuo aggregation of individual particles, refuse of the social and of the media impulses: an opaque nebula whose growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to collapse finally under its own weight. A black hole which engulfs the social…" [3]. The revolted mass has absorbed the sociality itself and rendered any further reasoning senseless.

In principle, the advent of the Internet and an almost overall "connectivity" to social networks should have prompted a new individual to appear, an informed and interested one. Howard Rheingold devised a funny term "smart mob": having grasped an opportunity of communicating with no need to coax institutions that used to control most if not all means of human interaction before, people would start organizing on their own, identifying themselves in a new social (albeit virtual) space, shaping their free will and creating new sociality [4]. This will could give rise to a public opinion of an entirely different kind that would be based on knowledge rather than beliefs and thereby be able to consider the ongoing without biases or superstitions. And with an unrestricted access to information, an old scholarly dream should come true: a dream about a civilization of knowledge where knowledge would guarantee justice in the society built upon this civilization and if not sure happiness for everybody, then the conditions where happiness becomes potentially feasible.

Alas, these exultant forecasts have failed against the dark omens. A long-awaited joy of worldwide communication and an unrestricted access to web-resources appear to be in place yet in the same package with the trickiest machinery for controlling the very individuals enjoying their free interaction. The perfection in technologies has turned into a collapse in the humanitarian field: T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer [5] warned about it after linking this collapse to the fundamental contradiction existing between the human and the "machine" and reflecting the collision between natural and rational which, in its turn, is an attributive quality of the "culture industry" built by humanity. In their essence, technologies remain anti-human as they are unable to overcome their intrinsically anti-human nature.

Even though the original concept of public opinion was solely meant to enable taking into account what the entire (or at least of some part of) population thinks, it invariably raised a host of doubts. How can an opinion common to all humans possibly form where a univalent estimate is in need

even among the professionals? And once this concept had shifted its focus onto the mass, it became perfectly clear that the majority would prefer seeking for the details of stars' private lives to delving into serious social or political matters, and would make little effort to reach an impartial and sound judgement should any interest in such matters ever arise. In the mass society, public opinion itself is asking to sacrifice it to manipulations: "on the one hand, mobilised opinion, formulated opinion, pressure groups formulated around a system of explicitly formulated interests; and, on the other hand, there are dispositions which, by definition, are not opinion if one means by that […] something that can be formulated in discourse with some claim to coherence" [6].

Any scientific (or at least would-be scientific) interpretation of public opinion demands a proven set of tools for exploring it. Since the days when George Gallup succeeded in predicting poll results with the help of the dedicated methods, the sociological approach to the study of societies has acquired a technological aspect: the more sophisticated technique is used for the study, the more reliable are its results and the more accurately the "people's opinion" is reflected. An ontological counterpart moves behind; who is thinking, or can it be called a result of contemplations is not important anymore, and the goal is now to capture the existing state of affairs. "Methodological determinism" has triumphed in sociology.

With the Descartes' habit to doubt everything, the French are calling in question the technology itself. Patrick Champagne scrutinizes technical issues with polling and emphasizes their contradictory sources, and methodological traits inherited by definition from the researcher's attitude and bound to be translated by the respondents anyhow [7]. Catching mood of the famous "spiral of science" logics, Pierre Bourdieu provokes a new turn of debates over the people's "disposition" to talk one or other way in a setup aggravated by lobbying where the interests of particular groups are deemed "common," and your own opinion, a consensus. The technology is mixed with the ontology whereas the empirics sold as a science-based legitimacy of public opinion lose their grounds. A scientific image remains instrumentally transparent and persists as a token of technological know-how insensible to pet corns of the "silent majority." And the latter will only feel more comfortable under the aegis of real science granting the indulgences for the truth's sake. The bottom line is that "armed with the technologies required to cherish freedom of opinions in the modern society, economic powers intrude the politics and occupy them as far as their might can yield" [8], i.e., the one in possession of measuring instruments is the Lord, no less.

II.   MANIPULATING PUBLIC OPINION

By and large, public opinion is a sleight of hand better mastered by a professional cheater who would fool someone into thinking they have concocted it on their own. The more cynical is a politically-centred approach where the initial ontological incongruence as to what is accepted by, or important for, the masses, is distorted by smart philosophical reveries with the real stance missing, routinely applied by sundry sociologists and politologists in their futile efforts to classify the means of manipulation and in the most obtuse yet persistent ways to implant them.

In such environment, manipulating public opinion is regular, or worse, commonplace. A typical example would be the notorious "Dima Yakovlev Law" that prohibits USA citizens from adopting children born in Russia. Regardless of the vetoes in a slew of very important issues, take it to the mass media and they will surely remind you that the only issue with this law is preventing any citizen of the USA from adopting any Russian kiddie, the grounds behind being a whole bunch of articles and polls that add up to a substance of the public opinion duly accepted [9; 10; 11; 12] as a merit of foreign pre-eminence threatening the society. And the mass, as it ought to be, is left to enjoying the trees behind the forest.

Yielding this manipulating inevitable, the point is now to discuss whether it has anything positive about it. The orphanage itself would almost always fail hitting the public rhetoric save negative implications of various kinds, e.g., runaway boys engaged in gangs or hostel grads unable to adapt to the so-called normal life. Yet, with the Law once received its coverage in the mass media, people have started thinking of a would-be adoption, and the statistics has broken free. Never mind that the actual fraction of children adopted overseas has dwindled twice, the actual figures are now greater than those before the approval of the said Law (as of the Internet data posted by the RF Department of Education and Science [13], 58.8 thousand in ward in 2012 compared to 69.2 in 2013 and to 62.9 in 2014). This hails the statistics in the returned children rate that is equally promising: the ratio of returned children in 2013 compared to 2009 is some 9.1% against 9.7%. Looking like a trifle, it is a lot indeed considering a child's fortune behind the scenes. The figures show a palpable shift in the mass opinion, the shift by the reconfigured balance in understanding, the shift that would never occur had ever-provoking mass media be negligent in all that.

III.   TRICKS USED TO MANIPULATE PUBLIC OPINION

It seems that the interest heated by the mass media as regards the orphanage has positively influenced the behaviour of potential Russian adopters. Can the mechanics of such influence be actually traced? To answer this question, let us make a short survey into the position taken by various publishers as to the approved Law and to foreign adoption, and consider a set of thirteen Internet articles conforming to the following criteria: each article should be published by official online sites, should be based on reliable sources, should not be anonymous, and should directly concern with the orphanage or with the discussion of the "Dima Yakovlev Law." So, the issue dates of the articles we have selected range from the Law approval date to the present days, to reflect the changes in public opinion over the time period in question. The materials include the discussions with the masters in the field of relevance, and the benchmarks in particular adoption cases confirmed by statistical data as required.

However diversified the texts could look at a glance, their analysis discloses certain common patterns used to appraise the Law itself, its practical outcomes, and its devotees or haters alike. Conceptually, all articles can be identified as either "pro-Russian" or "pro-American" judging by their support or denial of the "Dima Yakovlev Law," by their attitude towards foreign adoption in general, by the specific public figures quoted and arguments presented, and by the wordings endowed to the American side. Most naturally, "pro-Russian" texts outnumbered "pro-American" ones: nine out of thirteen articles were expressly "pro-Russian," three articles stood to the other side, and one could be called neutral.

The scope of manipulating techniques in the articles was quite wide but foreseeable. The tricks we have found include the "Name-calling," "Glittering generalities," "Testimonial," "Transfer," "Substitution," "Plain folks," "Card stacking" and "Talking-over" [14], with the following air about them. The "Name-calling" refers to entities with the qualities (no matter positive or negative) convenient for the manipulator and looking perfectly natural for an average person because they are mentioned all too often. For example, the Russian mass media will repeatedly declare homosexuality a mental disorder implying something wrong or ill tempered and thereby calling for a negative response. The "Glittering generalities" are vague expressions used by the manipulator to assure that the absolute majority ("the predominating public opinion") would accept this very viewpoint. Newspapers, magazines and TV shows are replete with phrases like "More than half of the Russians…," "Almost two thirds of the population…" or "Eighty percents of marriages…" activating "the spiral of silence" [15] in response: being a conformist is both simpler and safer. The "Testimonial" is presenting the required assertion or idea on behalf of a popular person (a well-known scientist, journalist, writer, actor, sportsman, etc.). This trick is common to advertisements ("the stars advise…") and often used by politicians for their benefit. The "Transfer" is stealing somebody's authority or prestige and reassigning it to the desired person by carrying over or by comparison of certain qualities. Here, the object is forcibly associated with something readily identified as positive (or, conversely, negative) by the public consciousness. The "Substitution" is the use of laudatory words and definitions to induce negative or positive sentiments: an event is no more judged by actual events around it but by how they are named and rated by news reporters or editors. The "Plain folks" is creating an impression of being kindred with a particular person or a social group. This includes lexical pairs such as "ordinary citizens" or "common people," and workers in various areas where the people attribute themselves to, either consciously or unconsciously. The "Card stacking" may be illustrated by a Soviet anecdote about the competition between an American and a Soviet runner. The American wins. The Soviet reporters put it this way: "Our sportsman came second, and the American, next to last." The "Talking-over" is used to divert attention from really important problems in favour of would-be breaking or tabloid news of some kind.

The "Name-calling" was the most frequent trick in the analysed articles about the Law. First, each and every article used the phrase "victim boy" at least once, invoking a specific connotation by itself. Given that, only the number of references to, and the included or omitted details of, the child's death ("atrocious crime," "locked under the blazing sun," "toddler died of a stroke"), were sole distinctions. Everything related to the USA and to Americans adopting the children was normally classified as negative. "Pro-American" articles sought for words weighted against the adoption bans to stress that the children would not be able to find their new families in the USA now (the Dima Yakovlev Law "has doomed innumerable orphans all over the country to living in asylums" and "destroyed the hopes of many hundreds of orphans that had already been acquainted with their future adopting parents from the USA.").

Feeling close to a particular person was more frequent in "pro-American" articles when it came to the Americans previously acquainted with the Russian children but run out of luck in completing the adoption procedure timely because of the Law. A touching article quoting the letters to the President was directly meant to inspire the reader's sympathy with those who wrote about their love and affection, i.e., about the feelings known to everyone. Breaking the stereotype that all Americans are of quite a different breed was the aim of this trick in a given context. On the other hand, the data dispersed over "pro-Russian" articles showed that some Russian people are ready to adopt children; this also points to an effort of engaging the readers into the discourse and making them feel part of the communion.

The articles were differing in their emotionality measured by the frequency of epithets or vernaculars in use (e.g., there were phrases like "Alexander Rzhanenkov is wailing over" or "Seven kids were shelved") and by the overall targeting (an ITAR-TASS article about the fates of children adopted by foreigners). By definition, everything concerning filicide or orphanage has a major impact on both Russian and any other society; therefore, whatever the style of individual articles, either official or publicistic, all of them unavoidably included such collocations as "violation of human rights," "in memory of the deceased boy" and "adoption ban." This may be called one of manipulating methods insofar as the subject of reasoning itself tempts the reader into thinking one or other way about the event; and the journalist's job is reduced to directing these thoughts along the required course. The support of the Law by the Russian citizens, their stance towards foreign adoption and orphanage-related problems in Russia, as well as their ability and will of becoming the adopters largely depend on the manner used to provide them with the relevant information. Emotional pressure is the proper way selected in both "pro-Russian" and some "pro-American" articles. The first ones were pressing on brutal treatment of Russian children by certain foreign adopters, some of the latter remaining unpunished still. One of the articles even started a talk about the so-called "American markets" selling children. Of course, this can cause nothing but the strongest indignation in the hearts of the readers. Such articles create a feeling that the children adopted in the

USA are in danger because of the numerous known cases of violence towards them.

Emotionality is not the only difference between the articles: argumentation is another one to remark. Some journalists described particular cases with the children, some others operated with figures, and some of them quoted expert opinions in the field of concern. A "pro-Russian" course is clearly traceable in all articles mentioning Pavel Astakhov, the Children's Rights Commissioner. These articles would often argue that the "Americans were unprepared for adoption," "children became a burden to their new parents," "kids should have remained in their home country," "child was beaten by his foster-mother," etc. Such argumentation is rather axiological and emotional even though Astakhov himself used to quote certain data on the death rate of children in the USA and on the disastrous child trafficking. This said, "pro-American" articles also employed emotional argumentation. For example, the letters of American families and of a boy from Chelyabinsk addressed to Putin used similar tricks. These articles tampered with "love," "trust" and "separation" to come closer to the readers and to evoke their feelings of loss and deep sympathy with those families that had been unable to reunify with the children scheduled for adoption and already dear to them. Rational arguments included the statistics of children whose adoption had been "frozen" after the approval of the Law and supported by the thought that these children have lost a real chance for happiness: either in Russia, or anywhere else. And, a step further, the statistics that the percentage of adopted "difficult" children, either wrong-behaving or disabled, is quite high (in fact, only 6-7% of children adopted abroad are disabled, but it is still higher than 2-3% adopted in Russia).

The attitude towards foreign adoption is yet another issue where the two groups of articles sharply disagree. The support of such adoption can only be found in "pro-American" materials pondering over the child's fortune ruined by the government. "Pro-Russian" articles retort: even though the percentage of foreign adopters has halved, the overall adoption rate is the same, meaning that the resulting gap is now filled by the Russian citizens. Another argument in favour of foreign adoption is the advanced health care system lending a hand to seriously ill children. Children with disabilities or genetic diseases have virtually no adoption opportunities in Russia broadly because their medical treatment in this country is either too expensive or downright impossible. But, as soon as they are taken abroad, they are given a fair chance to be healed and to live in a happy family. "Pro-Russian" experts claim that the State Duma is now considering an increase in social payments for citizens adopting unhealthy children. The article about the Charity Fund of Mikhail Prokhorov and Alla Pugacheva confirms that the State is not alone in solving the problems with such children. Yet, alluding to political and stage celebrities is also a method of influence leveraging the transfer of their popularity to other domains in order to draw attention to a certain social problem. As a final remark, the materials we have discussed prove suitable for revealing various explicit or implicit manipulating techniques, their primary goal being public involvement in socially important problems of orphanage where an allowance for the existing situation with foreign adoption by the USA citizens shall be made.

IV. CONCLUSION

The number of children in Russian childcare institutions is so large that it poses a serious problem irresolvable by the mass media alone however intricate manipulating techniques they could possibly use. This being the case, the mass consciousness seemed to be comfortably numb as to any adoption issues until the "Dima Yakovlev Law" was approved leaving uneasy doubts about the whole story. One or another publication would appear from time to time receiving rather phlegmatic responses from the mass consciousness that would otherwise remain deaf to orphanage-related problems. And, recognizing that the results of the above empirical study (of a tentative and reconnaissance mood, as it stands) cannot be termed a rigorous proof of manipulating the Russian soul by the mass media and its tuning in consonance with the issues related to orphanage and adoption, the approach to such issues lacks proper emphasis in the society. The approved Law and the overall mess around it have paradoxically forced the mass consciousness to focus on actual social problems that would hopefully be resolved one day.

So, Bourdieu was right of course: there is no such thing as public opinion. Nonetheless, comprehensive studies of manipulating could open up opportunities more promising than the ones predicted by the theorists in public opinion and the critics of mass society. And even if manipulating cannot be altogether avoided, it should be used for the benefit of the society. All that remains to be done is to make clear what it really is.

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