

THE BIRTH OF PUBLIC OPINION

The rule of public opinion is now taken more or less for granted. Presidents consult the polls before announcing new policies; legislators invoke their constituents' desires to justify their votes; television network executives worship the Nielsen ratings. This idea of a public with a defined will that can be expressed is a relatively modern one, born of the Age of Enlightenment. But what we think of as "public opinion" means something far different from what it did in the 18th century. Historian Anthony La Vopa examines how the idea has changed.

by Anthony J. La Vopa

In the liberal democracies of the West, and in a growing number of other nations, the "public" and its "opinion" are fixtures of modern life. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how culture and politics ever managed without them. The highbrow poet, the pulp novelist, the classical musician, the rock star, the avante-garde filmmaker, the director of TV sit-coms: All of these producers of "culture" need an image of the "public" and its expected reaction, whether they aim to please or to antagonize their audience. Without a "public," government has no way of entering into a dialogue with society; it relies instead on a barrage of propaganda. Unable to express its opinion publicly, society has no way (short of the threat of violent upheaval) of making government responsive to its changing needs.

The ancient *polis*, of course, had its public forum and its *vox populi*. But "public opinion" is, as historians measure such

things, a recent innovation. It was in the course of the 18th century that "public" joined "opinion" in a new pairing—and the result was a dramatic change in the meaning of the latter word. At the beginning of the 18th century, "opinion" had generally connoted blinkered vision and fickleness, in contrast to the unchanging universality of Truth. By the end of the century, opinion in its "public" guise was endowed with a rational objectivity. Public opinion was the authoritative judgment of a collective conscience, the ruling of a tribunal to which even the state was subject. It was to be confused neither with blind adherence to traditional authority nor with the mob loyalty that modern political demagoguery seemed to command.

The timing of this semantic shift was no accident. The 18th century was the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, and "public opinion" was one of its characteristic products. It was not simply that the "public," in

the ideal, embodied the Enlightenment's aspiration to construct a truly rational polity, able to criticize itself objectively. The new pairing distilled the values, aspirations, and misgivings of the educated and propertied elite that gave the Enlightenment its social profile.

As historian Keith Baker and several other scholars have demonstrated, "public opinion" exercised its strongest appeal and exhibited its ironies most dramatically in *ancien régime* France. That, too, is no accident. As the sacred authority of the Bourbon monarchy was eroded beyond recovery, the need for a secular replacement—a single, undivided source of political legitimacy—seemed increasingly urgent. An arena of open political conflict was forming, but to many Frenchmen it seemed to portend chaos rather than progress. Hence the duality that marked 18th-century appeals to public opinion everywhere in continental Europe and the Anglo-American world was heightened in France.

"Public opinion" *did* loom as a workable alternative to traditional authority, and in that sense it was eminently modern from birth. And yet there is also a sense in which the concept, in its original state of innocence, was an antidote to the onset of modern politics. In our own era, as politics takes the form of photo opportunities and sound bites, that antidote can seem at once all the more appealing and all the less likely to work.

Who appealed to the tribunal of public opinion in the 18th century? A complete list would include Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, Denis Diderot, and other familiar figures from the Enlightenment's pantheon, but it would also take us deep into the lower tiers of thinkers. By the close of the 18th century, reverence for the public's judgment had become obligatory among progressive clergymen as well as among the skeptics who dismissed Christianity as mere "superstition." It was shared—or at least seemed to be shared—by opposing camps of scholars; by novelists and by their critics; by government ministers and by op-



As this 1780 French etching shows, most people in the years around the Revolution got the news of the day by relying on the abilities of a literate few.

position journalists.

Whether "public opinion" was already a "preponderant force" in Europe by the 1780s, as playwright Louis-Sébastien Mercier claimed at the time, is open to question. The historical record leaves no doubt, however, that the concept was gaining currency and winning credibility. It became credible in part because an actual "public" was forming. Historians are now in a position to explain this phenomenon, since they have ceased to approach the Enlightenment simply as a March of Ideas and have studied it as a process of social communication and social change. Public opinion—in the broadest sense of the term—was an intricate circuit of writing, reading, and talking. Its jurisdiction lay within the expanding universe of print. Full-fledged membership in the true "public"—the "enlightened" tribunal—required a measure of affluence and education that the majority of Europeans, including many of the literate, did not enjoy. Within that limitation, however, the public was to be found in microcosm wherever men gathered to discuss the ideas circulated in print. Its locales

ranged from elegant salons to modest coffee houses. It might be said, in fact, that a network of "enlightened" communities, peopled by only a few thousand souls, invented public opinion as a way of talking about and validating itself.

This is also a way of saying, of course, that the tribunal of public opinion was a weapon in the Enlightenment's large arsenal of abstractions. It figures as such in Voltaire's campaign against Christian intolerance; in the mounting attacks on royal despotism and aristocratic corruption in France; in the rationales of reform-minded government officials throughout Europe; in the efforts to liberate literature and the arts from conventional rules. The point is not that public opinion was an empty abstraction from the start but that it was so appealing precisely because it was a highly serviceable fiction.

Napoleon once remarked that "Cannon killed feudalism," but "ink will kill modern society." The 18th-century men of letters were more likely to observe that ink—or, more precisely, printer's ink—was *creating* modern society. Its most obvious creation was "the public."

This is not to suggest that print was being produced on a modern scale. Until the steam engine was harnessed to moveable type in the early 19th century, there was little improvement in the hand-operated wooden press Johann Gutenberg had invented in 1450. Even if the technology had been better, the market for print would have remained pitifully small by modern commercial standards. The majority of the European population still lacked the excess cash and the sophisticated reading skills that most books and periodicals required. In 1785 the Netherlands' *Gazette de Leyde*, a French-language newspaper with a press run of just over 4,000, was one of the most widely read in Europe.

And yet historians speak of an 18th-century "revolution" in print, and not simply because the century witnessed a prolifera-

tion of printing shops, booksellers, reading clubs, and circulating libraries. On the eve of the French Revolution print offered Europeans far more information, a much greater variety of ideas, and incomparably more entertainment than it had offered a century earlier. In most educated homes reading was no longer primarily an act of religious devotion; the Bible and the devotional tract had been displaced by the novel and the entertaining journal. Government had become a newsworthy subject, and often an object of controversy, in a variety of newspapers available along the main commercial and postal routes.

The demand for print was growing, though it remained narrowly restricted by modern standards. In aristocratic circles "pedantry" still provoked disdain but illiteracy had become an embarrassment. If reading had become a habit among the well-born, there was a veritable craving for print among the much larger population Samuel Johnson classified as "that middle race . . . who read for pleasure or accomplishment." Bourgeois government officials, clergymen, lawyers and other professionals, merchants, affluent artisans, and shopkeepers—these educated and propertied commoners, along with their wives and children, were the typical consumers in the new print market.

If alarmed government officials and clerics had had their way, the range of consumer choices would have been considerably narrower. Even in "absolutist" France, however, official censorship was held in check by its own inconsistencies and the behind-the-scenes mediation of liberal-minded officials. The royal law courts (the *parlement*) in Paris still ordered the hangman to burn books publicly, and among the works consumed by the flames were Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* (1734) and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762). But these acts of official censure likely whetted the reading public's appetite for risqué literature, and in any case they were not necessarily followed by a royal ban. Many pub-

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lishers—the publication of the last 10 volumes of the *Encyclopédie* may offer the most striking example—simply sidestepped the director of the Library and his small army of censors by not applying for the royal *privilège*. More often the government allowed questionable material to pass through the quasi-legal loophole of “tacit” permission. Even that was not required for legal briefs. In the scandal trials of the 1780s barristers used these briefs to portray their clients as hapless victims of aristocratic arrogance and royal despotism. Printed in thousands of copies, these *mémoires* did much to create the impression that the entire establishment was hopelessly corrupt.

There was also a heavy flow of illegal literature, most of which was supplied by Dutch and Swiss publishers on the borders of the Bourbon kingdom. Contraband in print was smuggled in crates past bribed customs officials, or hidden in men’s breeches and under women’s skirts. French booksellers tempted their customers with anti-Christian tracts and with pornography; with pamphlets detailing the sufferings of dissident writers in royal dungeons; with scabrous “libels” of prominent figures in the royal family, at court, and in the government. *Les Fastes de Louis XV* (1782) was perhaps the most widely read clandestine book in France on the eve of the Revolution. It included a lurid inventory of the depravities of Madame du Barry, the court mistress of Louis XV, who, in the words of its anonymous author, “had ascended in one leap from the brothel to the throne.”

The modern “public” owed its origins and its growth to this cornucopia of print. In its broadest contours, however, the new public was as much a product of talk as it was of reading. As print entered symbiosis with new kinds of conversation in new social settings, it produced myriad ripple effects that cannot be measured by press runs and sales figures. Novel-reading, for example, was central to a new kind of domestic privacy in many educated bourgeois households.

Among the bestsellers were epistolary novels such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1741) and Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Hé-*

loise (1761), which spun their plots around the joys and perils of courtship and marital life and were well-suited to filling the idle hours of mothers and daughters. Even when such novels were not read aloud in the family circle, as they often were, they helped create a new, emotion-charged language of family intimacy.

As the bourgeois family circumscribed its private space, developing its own moral standards, it also examined itself obsessively in the printed pages of the novel. This self-examination was critical to the emergence of a modern public. It helps explain, in fact, why the public eventually assumed a critical posture towards government.

By the early 18th century, reading and conversation were nourishing each other in a variety of new public and quasi-public spaces. These spaces formed as the center of public life shifted from the royal courts of Europe to the cities, and as pedigrees and titles ceased to be the exclusive requirements for admission. Versailles and the courts modeled on it embodied the principle that the king was the only “public” figure, since his person was the single and indivisible source of all public authority. Royal splendor radiated outward through a court aristocracy displaying itself in relentless rounds of ceremony and theatrical festivity.

Since the early 17th century, Paris had witnessed the emergence of a new kind of public society that would eventually displace Versailles. Originally an overwhelmingly aristocratic milieu, it called itself “the world” (*le monde*) as a way of saying that it encompassed everyone who counted. *Le monde* gathered regularly in the capital’s salons, under the guidance of highborn women in need of amusement and intellectual sustenance. In the highly mannered conversational art of the salon, gossip and scandal shaded naturally into literary discussion. In the 18th century, as the market for literature expanded, *le monde* opened its doors to the well-known as well as to the well-born and to the well-heeled. For the bourgeois man of letters regular appearances on the salon circuit, perhaps at the cost of literary effort, had become a requirement of literary celebrity.

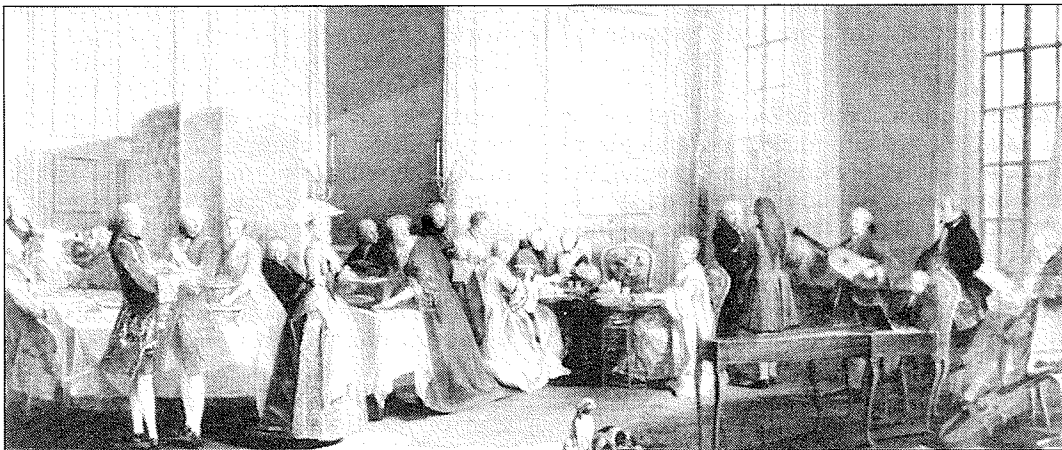
By the mid-18th century the salon was one of several European institutions that

brought together noblemen and educated and propertied commoners in new rituals of sociability and intellectual exchange. The royal academies founded in the 17th century by Louis XIV in Paris had counterparts throughout provincial France. The “academicians” were appointed from the ranks of the educated bourgeoisie and the clergy as well as from the office-holding aristocracy. While their public ceremonies paid homage to the monarchy, they formed what one member in Dijon called a “republic” of “citizen-spirits” behind closed doors. The monarchy had no reason to question this arrangement; by promoting a frank exchange of ideas, the academies were able to clarify vital public issues. The same purpose was served by the academies’ many essay contests, which were open to all men of wit and literary talent. The typical winner may have been a mediocrity mouthing conventional wisdom, but there were stunning exceptions. In 1750 the Dijon Academy awarded first prize to a watchmaker’s son and former vagabond named Jean Jacques Rousseau. A misfit in *le monde*, paralyzed in the face of salon politesse and wit, Rousseau had used the occasion of the essay contest to launch his attack on the falseness of modern civilization.

Most European universities suffered by comparison with the new academies. Stereotyped as bastions of tradition-bound, boorish pedantry, they were crowded with obscure commoners who survived hand-to-

mouth while preparing for the clergy. They were not the kind of places aristocratic scions were likely to visit on the Grand Tour. But several universities were anything but academic ghettos. Tounis College in Edinburgh entered the 18th century as little more than a stodgy Presbyterian seminary, but in the middle decades of the century, under the leadership of the town council and several reform-minded professors, it introduced a modern curriculum in the liberal arts. The new offerings catered to sons of gentlemen as well as to future clergymen, since they blended a “godliness” free of zealotry with the urbane “politeness” that the weekly *Spectator* had begun to propagate from London several decades earlier. Thanks to its university, Edinburgh, a provincial city in London’s orbit, became known as a modern Athens.

On the continent, the closest equivalent was the Georg-August University of Göttingen, founded by the Hanoverian government in 1737. Attracting first-rate scholars with its generous salaries and well-endowed library, and frowning on the theological polemics that soured life at other universities, the Georg Augusta was soon an innovative center in the fields of law, politics, history, and classical studies. Again commoners mixed with noblemen, who came to Göttingen from across Europe to groom themselves for government service or simply for a life of leisured refinement. In the space of a few decades a sleepy pro-



Salonnières, such as the Princess de Conti of Paris, whose salon is shown here in a 1777 painting, provided important forums where the educated could meet to discuss ideas.

vincial town became one of the intellectual entrepôts of Europe.

Another refuge from social convention was the new "brotherhood" of Freemasonry, which crossed the Channel from London in the 1730s and spread across the urban landscape of France and the German states. Outside the lodge "brothers" might face each other across the barriers of rank and wealth, or might find themselves on opposite sides of volatile confessional and "political" issues. But within its artificially segregated space they could shed their social skins and inherited prejudices and discuss ideas (or at least some ideas) as one "human being" to another.

If Freemasonry formed a micropublic, it was also paradoxically a cult movement that shut out the public at large. More typical of the new sociability was the coffee house. In the course of the 18th century, as coffee drinking became a daily habit for millions of Europeans, the café became a fixture of urban life. London may have remained the world's caffeine capital, but Vienna, with 48 coffee houses by 1770, was a formidable rival. The visitor to any provincial capital, court town, or university town could expect to find at least one or two such establishments. Most did not aspire to the elegance of Vienna's café Milani, whose mirrored hallways, marble façades, and chandeliers were reminiscent of Versailles. Instead they offered an atmosphere of intimacy to be found nowhere else outside the home. Friends and colleagues could gather regularly to enjoy a cup of coffee or tea, perhaps accompanied by a pastry; to play cards or billiards; to read the newspapers and other periodicals; to discuss the affairs of the day.

"You can meet half the world in Richter's café," Friedrich Schiller observed from Leipzig in 1785. This was still an exclusive "world," requiring affluence and leisure, but it was far more open than the Parisian salons of a century earlier. The openness and the informality made for intense, sometimes volatile discussion of the latest novel or review, of changes in government policy, of rumors of war and prospects for peace. The vibrant coffee house, a German observer remarked with understandable exaggeration, was a "political

stock exchange where the most daring and clever heads from all social stations gather."

Ironically, women were not among the assembled heads, just as they were largely absent from the academies, the lodges, and the university lecture halls. As the presiding figures at salons, and as authors and readers of fiction, women had played a critical role in the formation of a "public." But political scientist Joan Landes is probably correct in arguing that, the more bourgeois the public became, the less room and tolerance it had for women. Bourgeois resentment of aristocratic privilege often focused on the intellectual pretensions and the political intrigues of high-born salon women. The *salonnière* became the foil to the ideal wife and mother, who shunned public life in the conviction that her "natural" role was to rear her children and to support her husband with modest intellectual companionship at home. If the novel kept women involved in the literary public as readers, it also directed their search for self-fulfillment to an idealized world of domestic happiness, insulated from the hurly-burly of professional life and politics.

This fictional dichotomy at once reflected and sanctioned a new kind of social segregation. As educated men found a refuge from the rigors of public life in the new domesticity, they found a respite from domesticity in their lodges, their clubs, and their coffee houses.

But while the 18th-century public had its visible locales, there was also a sense in which it remained invisible. To some, its invisibility was the key to its power. The true public had to have a single will or conscience, and that evoked something greater than a mere aggregate of institutions or communities. This is not to say that the public was a fiction; there *was* a circuitry of written and spoken words out there, and somehow something called "opinion" formed in it and flowed through it.

When authors appealed to this invisible tribunal of public opinion, however, they were evoking an *ideal* rather than a measurable force. It requires a strenuous leap of historical imagination to grasp the ideal in its original state of innocence and to make sense of expectations that may seem hopelessly naive today.

At the core of the ideal was the principle of "publicity." Today this term makes us think of the corporate PR person, with smokescreens of apparent candor, or of *paparazzi* appealing to the public's "right to know" as their cameras follow celebrities into bedrooms. What struck 18th-century observers was not the abuse of publicity in an open society, but its vast potential to open up a closed society. In old-regime Europe, secrecy was one of the guiding principles of life. Government set an example by regarding the practice of statecraft as an *arcantum*, a secret expertise that ordinary subjects were not in a position to understand and had no right to know. When the French *parlements* began to "go public" by publishing their remonstrances, the Crown stubbornly insisted that it alone decided what was fit for public consumption. England was considered an excessively open polity by French standards, but until at least the 1770s London newspapers risked prosecution when they published reports on the debates of the House of Commons.

Government policy reflected the tenacity of traditional norms. In the political arena formed by the ruler's court, intrigue was the stuff of politics; behind the court's elaborate façade of public ceremony, ministers competed with courtiers and mistresses to win favor and to carry the day. In their very different social settings, guilds of skilled craftsmen jealously guarded trade secrets.

"Publicity" meant a new openness, with its promise of a new civic spirit. The expectation was not, of course, that closed governments would suddenly throw open their doors to public scrutiny. Government would follow the example of society, as people became more transparent to each other in all walks of life. In the intricate pecking order of old-regime corporatism, everyone was expected to command the authority and render the deference appropriate to his station. Confined to their social personae, people never interacted simply as persons or, in 18th-century parlance, in the purity of their shared "humanity." It was this kind of purely human communication that Masonic lodges aspired to achieve, and that the 18th-century cult of friendship idealized.

Print had even greater potential to effect

the same egalitarian transparency. Print did not bring author and reader face to face, and that was its paradoxical advantage. Its impersonality made for a kind of "human" intimacy, free of domination and subservience, that face-to-face social relations rarely admitted. Eighteenth-century authors were fond of evoking this paradox; the faceless mass of readers were, or at least could be, their "friends" and their "confidantes."

With its call for public scrutiny and, at a deeper level, its new spirit of open and egalitarian exchange, the Enlightenment developed a strikingly modern strategy for reform. If government was to be accountable to public opinion, it had to be open to the public gaze. If abuses were to be remedied, they had to be brought to the light of day and discussed without inhibition in the public forum. All this sounds sensible enough, but we are likely to be brought up short by the 18th-century corollary: that the new openness would somehow generate a moral consensus about the direction reform ought to take. In our age of election polls and marketing surveys, the "public" tends to break down into groups with "interests" and corresponding "opinions," some coalescing into larger coalitions, others colliding head-on. Public opinion is a statistical aggregate, not the judgment of a single ethical voice.

There was a strain of 18th-century thought that regarded the pursuit of self-interest as a positive force for change, although it saw the individual, and not the group, as its proper agent. It was precisely because public opinion promised to transcend self-interest, however, that it was hailed as the moral arbiter for the entire society and polity. Inspired by their roseate image of Periclean Athens and the Roman Republic, 18th-century rationalists sought a modern collective expression of the classical ideal of civic virtue. Now that "each citizen is able to speak to the entire nation through the medium of print," the French Academy was informed by one of its new members in 1755, "the men of letters are for a dispersed public what the orators of Rome and Athens were in the midst of an assembled public."

In a rational society, public goals would

be established by men who had an unobstructed view of the public welfare and hence could form disinterested judgments. Their consensus was, to be sure, an "opinion," which was to say that it was less than a definitive grasp of Truth. If the consensus was nonetheless authoritative, that was because the myriad judgments that constituted it had been made in splendid moral isolation. The crux of the matter—the axiomatic assumption—was that public opinion ought to be grounded in, and ought to draw its moral force from, the inviolable privacy of the individual conscience.

Like the ancient assembly, public discussion in print was a collective enterprise; but, as the German philosopher Christian Garve (1742–1798) reminded his readers, in the end each member of the public "must judge for himself," as though from a position of unconditional moral autonomy. The point was not simply that open coercion was intolerable; even subtler forms of power—the authority of tradition, for example, or the seductive force of rhetoric—threatened to violate the purity of this ideal.

The formation of public opinion was seen as a process of purification. As the warring "passions" were strained out, the authoritative consensus of "reason" emerged.

We tend to smile patronizingly at the naiveté of this expectation. The assumption of a universal "reason" seems highly dubious in the light of modern cultural relativism and philosophical agnosticism, and in any case the need for consensus now seems less urgent. The ascendancy of interest-group politics, after all, has not shattered most Western polities; nor has a pluralistic culture, with its incessant clash of opinions, torn them apart.

To reform-minded men in the 18th century, however, the term "interests" often evoked caste prejudices and the abuse of legal privileges. Group self-interest meant corporate selfishness, which seemed incompatible with rational progress. The prospect of open conflict raised the specter of chaos, probably in the form of civil war. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Europeans had been plagued by religious war between Catholics and Protestants (as in France, the

Netherlands, and Germany) and between a Protestant Establishment and radical dissenters (as in England). Skeptical rationalists wanted to tame religious beliefs by reducing them to one more species of "opinion," but they were acutely aware that in matters of faith, opinions easily hardened into prejudices.

The 18th century was "an age of *enlightenment*," Immanuel Kant reminded his readers in 1784, but it was not "an *enlightened* age." There was ample reason to fear that religious fanaticism and intolerance were alive and well. In England and Germany, Protestantism proved receptive to Enlightenment rationalism, but it also spawned movements like Pietism and



A gathering of the Enlightenment's greatest luminaries, including Voltaire (hand upraised), Diderot, and Condorcet, at Paris's popular 18th-century Café Procope.

Methodism, which sought to rekindle the evangelical fire. In France, Jansenism had similar aspirations, as its cult of miracles and the ecstasies of its "convulsionaries" demonstrated. As late as 1766, following an unsuccessful appeal to the *parlement* in Paris, the young Chevalier de la Barre was tortured, beheaded, and burned on suspicion of having mutilated crucifixes. The case prompted one of Voltaire's most impassioned appeals to "the public."

In modern democracies, political parties are supposed to play a central role in generating public opinion. But most 18th-century observers would have agreed with Christian Garve that "public opinion ceases to exist as soon as parties occur." The spirit of "party" meant fierce loyalty to a "par-

particular" cause, without regard for the common welfare, and the history of sectarian fanaticism left no doubt that that spirit was pernicious. This was the lesson that accompanied the application of the word "party" to an emerging arena of modern political conflict. Political partisanship joined religious zealotry as a threat to the reasoned, tolerant consensus that public opinion promised to articulate.

Both varieties of "party" threatened to fracture the body politic—or, as Garve might have put it, both kinds of opinion were incompatible with a truly public opinion. Whether the leader was a religious zealot or a political demagogue, he won the blind following of the "mob" rather than the reasoned consent of autonomous individuals. In both cases mass mobilization was a kind of contagion, an epidemic of "enthusiasm." And in both cases "enthusiasm" meant the kind of self-delusion that precluded rational judgment. The religious enthusiast mistook his neurotic obsessions for the voice of the Lord. Likewise, the political enthusiast mistook his "metaphysical" fantasies for universal truths about man and his "natural" rights.

By the eve of the French Revolution, the tribunal of public opinion was expected to fill a plethora of needs, and it was beginning to register the tensions among them. When the public censured the authoritarian government, the tunnel-visioned corporatism, and the overzealous professionalism of the old regime, it was the voice of a modern polity in the making. But public opinion also promised to preclude new, secular outbreaks of the party spirit. In that capacity it was an antidote to modernity, embodying the rationalist's fear that the polity was entering a chronic condition of partisan conflict. Even as French critics of the monarchy assumed an openly confrontational stance, they sought to dispel the specter of open contestation with their appeals to an authoritative consensus. Still "absolutist" in theory, the government had little choice but to respond in kind.

The final irony is that public opinion had become a kind of absolute in its own right. Precisely because the public will was no longer embodied in the person of the king, it had to find expression in a collective unity. It expressed itself in "opinion,"

and not in the transcendent truths that religious believers claimed to find in Revelation or in the depths of their own souls. But as a collective conscience hovering above mere "interests," and as a consensus purified of passions, public opinion had its own claim to transcendence.

The "people of intellect govern, because in the long run they form public opinion, which sooner or later subjugates or reverses every kind of despotism." This dictum was published by the royal historiographer of France in 1767, but it would not have been a bad guess to attribute it to a Czech intellectual celebrating the recent Velvet Revolution. When we speak of the former East Bloc countries joining (or returning to) the "free" West, we mean, among other things, that their governments have at last abandoned the pretext of embodying the Will of the Proletariat and have become accountable to public opinion.

As the recent thaw in Eastern Europe advanced, in fact, some historians had the eerie feeling that they were listening to a telescoped replay of an 18th-century script. Once again intellectuals were orchestrating a verbal assault on authoritarian government, often couched in the morally charged languages of fiction and philosophy. There was the same evocation of the public as a collective conscience, of public opinion as the record of its judgment, and of the principle of openness, or publicity, as the crux of reform. We seemed to have entered a time warp and to have recovered the original innocence invested in the concept of public opinion.

But the script has also been telescoped in another sense. The former Stalinist satellites are leaping headlong into the world of political parties, election campaigns, interest-group politics, and mass marketing. As they make the leap, vaulting optimism gives way to skepticism and the apotheosis of public opinion is muted, if not repudiated. Indeed, East European intellectuals find themselves fighting off a mood of bitter disillusionment as their political revolutions, along with their literary renaissance, are threatened by the allure of Western-style commercialism and by the withering attention of the electronic media.

Mass education and mass literacy, radio and television, modern advertising and electioneering: All have contributed to the fact that the modern public is a far cry from the 18th-century ideal. Despite the continuity of language, the opinion now measured incessantly in surveys and polls cannot be "public" in the 18th-century sense; as the invisible will has become the measureable aggregate, the concept has lost its original promise of moral invincibility. In a process that 18th-century rationalists would have regarded as self-contradictory, public opinion breaks down into a melee of *opinions*, and endless argument among claimants for the allegiance of the real public. One hopes for a clear numerical majority, not an authoritative consensus.

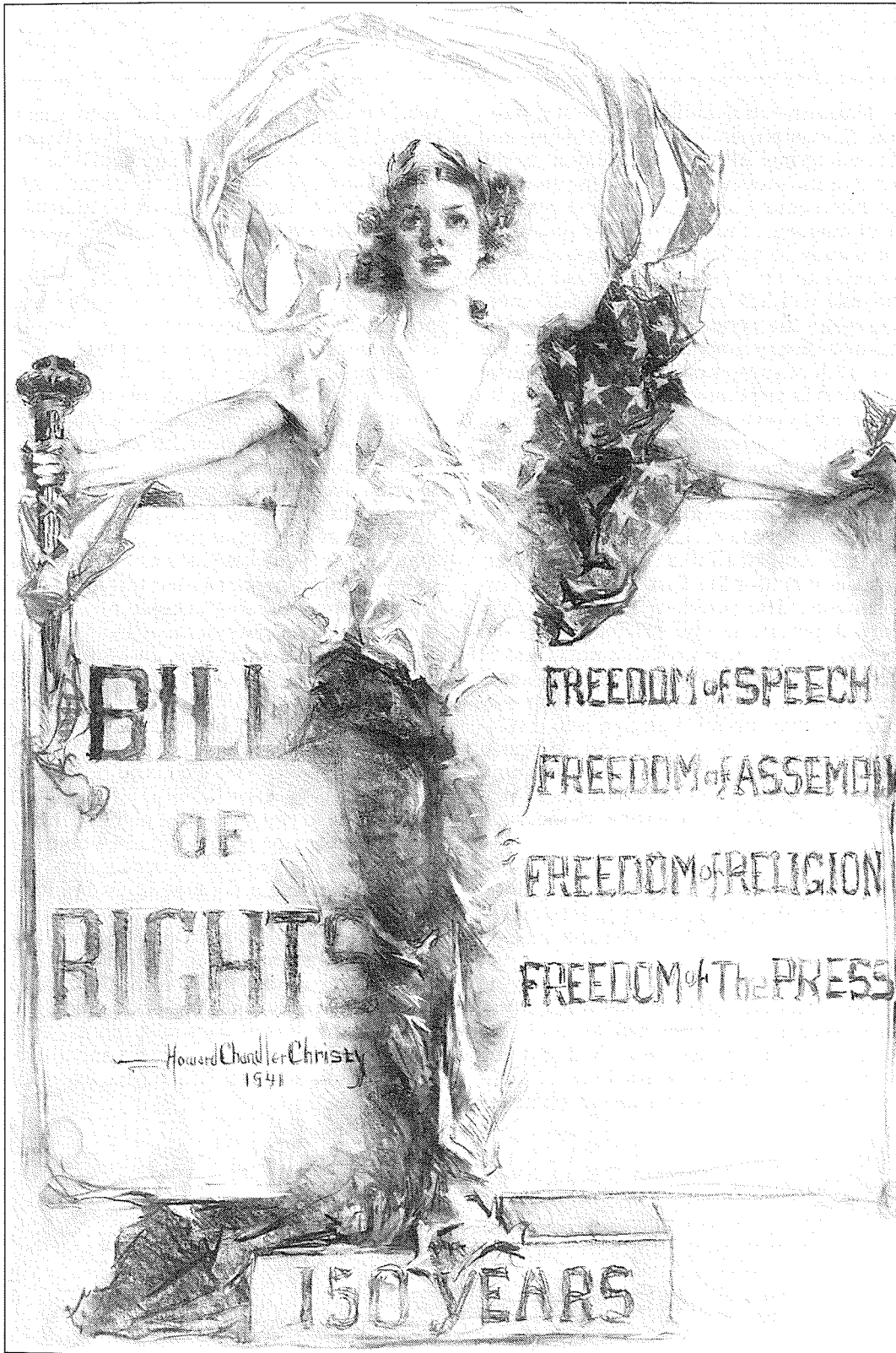
To judge by historical experience since the 18th century, all this does not necessarily spell doom for the Eastern European experiments. The problem may lie with a kind of purism in the original ideal—an aversion to the uncontrollable messiness of pluralistic conflict and mass participation. Those who still indulge in such purism may set themselves up for a plunge into disillusionment. Only those who can reconcile themselves to the fact that public opinion does not produce a pure consensus of reason will be able to navigate democratic politics successfully.

In 18th-century Europe, the onset of disillusionment was gradual, but it gained pace at the end of the century. "Friends of the Revolution," Garve wrote some time in the mid-1790s, "take refuge in public opinion as a *Qualitas occulta* that explains everything—or as a higher power that can excuse everything." Garve had in mind the orators and journalists who had justified mob violence and the Terror in revolutionary France. Others had already observed

that the expanding market for print was a mixed blessing for *belles lettres*. If it created a reading public, it also threatened to reduce literature to one more trivial commodity and to leave authors at the mercy of fickle consumers in search of effortless entertainment.

In its 18th-century apotheosis, public opinion was the voice of an educated and propertied elite. Faced with the Revolution's surge of democratic politics, and with the egalitarian momentum of an increasingly commercialized print market, the elite began to justify certain kinds of exclusion within the promise of openness. The sexual division of labor might exclude women from active participation in the new public, but how justify the continued exclusion of the broad mass of men? How could a part—the educated and propertied part—claim to speak credibly for the whole? Why were some people more capable of disinterested judgment than others? There were many answers, all justifying an elite's claim to speak with an authoritative voice. Authority now lay in the broad vision afforded by property ownership and education; in the professional's expert judgment on issues the "lay" public could not judge; in the literary critic's mission to guard "standards" against the onslaught of trash.

Public opinion would remain a court of appeal, but the size and composition of the jury had become a contentious issue. Public opinion may still evoke an ideal of rational consensus, but it turns out that the ideal itself is not exempt from political conflict or indeed from the struggle for profit. The new Eastern European democracies are learning this lesson very fast, though they have reminded us that, at least for a moment, public opinion can be the voice of conscience.



The 1941 sesquicentennial gave the Bill of Rights a sacred status it had not had before.