Public Opinion and Public Sphere: from Modernity to Post-Democracy?

Giorgio Grossi (University of Milan-Bicocca)

rd
       At the start of the 3rd millenium, two trends seem to characterise not only the Western world, but the entire global society: the growing recourse to appeals to public opinion, the mobilisation of opinions, and the measuring of individual and collective attitudes seems to exist side by side with the crisis in the institutions of representative democracy, social fragmentation, the vacuum in the public (especially national) sphere, the deficit in political participation. All this is taking place within a process of "glocalisation" in which media communication and the new ICT information technologies play an increasingly pervasive, strategic role.

       The aim of this paper is to seek to analyse this apparent contradiction, highlighting both the historical origin of the concepts of public opinion and public sphere, and their transformation within western society to the present situation, in which the very idea of democratic society - and hence the role of public opinion as a founding institution of the public sphere - seems to be cracking, due to the social processes and technological transformations which are marking the start of the new century.

1. The origins of modernity: the founding link between public opinion and media

       The relationship between media and public opinion today seems to be widely recognised as typical of post-industrial societies in late modernity. When we observe the political and social processes which mark both national societies and the global world, we almost always find a close link between the media system - old and new media -, information and symbolic flows and dynamics of opinion.

       We speak, for example, about *mediacracy* (Meyer 2002) and *videocracy* (Sartori 1999) to negatively stigmatise the transformations of representative democracy resulting from the central role played by the media and opinion polls in the processes of influencing and constructing consensus, to the prediction of a transition towards a "post-democratic" society" (Crouch 2003). Or, in the opposite direction, we refer to the *strong democracy*, to direct democracy with the participation of all citizens, made possible by the spread of the Web and the new interactive media (Barber 1984, Bentivegna 2002). Or we also thematise the need for a "deliberative democracy" as the only response to the crisis in representative democracy and its loss of collective "discursiveness" (Sampedro 2000), and even allude to the emergence of a World Public Opinion - as in the case of the opposition to the Iraq War in 2003 - as a new subject of political confrontation (and control) in a globalised world (Grossi 2004).

2

In any case, scholars and experts now seem to have acquired the conviction that this binomial lies at the hearts of the political and social processes characterising our everyday lives: "in a society every member is part of two communication networks: an inter-individual network (personal relations) and an institutional network, as media consumers. Media discourses and public opinion are often considered separately… In reality, public opinion is inseparable from the media" (Lazar 1995: 4).

This awareness of the close link between media and public opinion, however, has not always been so explicit and shared. There have been periods - during the last century - when focus was placed more on one phenomenon, public opinion (in the thirties, for example) or on the other, the media (in the forties and fifties). As there have also been historical phases in which the causal link was emphasised - when the "power of the media" was mentioned - or minimised - underlining instead the autonomy of trends and attitudes, their independence from persuasive messages ("limited effects"). But what has often been lacking is the recognition of the founding link which exists between media, public opinion and democracy in that historical period - to which we still belong, although with different interpretations and conceptualisations - we call modernity . The

1

underlying thesis in this paper is that to properly understand the role and function of the media in our society we must go back to the origins of modern society and highlight the historical-social link between the coming of the media of mass communication, the birth of public opinion and the theory of democracy. Each of these three fundamental dimensions of modernity can only be understood in relation to the others, and consequently, the very meaning of modernity - as long as this concept is able to adequately interpret the political and social dynamics of our age - depends largely on the interrelation and reciprocal influence of these three factors.

In order to truly grasp the structural valence of the media in the processes of socialisation and cognitive and symbolic governance of collective dynamics, it is therefore necessary to firstly go back briefly to the historical roots of the form of society which characterises western tradition: the liberal-democratic society arising from the French and the American Revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, then progressively evolving into representative democracy on a capitalistic basis, which was consolidated in the twentieth century, also in competition with the authoritarian and revolutionary regimes (Fascism, Nazism, Communism) which opposed its dominance.

Of the authors who focussed and thematised this founding link, we may dwell above all on two: Habermas (1974) and Thompson (1998). In what may now be considered a classic work of contemporary sociology - *Strukturwandel der Oeffenlikheit* -, the German scholar puts forward the hypothesis that in order to explain the birth of modern society - a mixture of bourgeois revolution,

development of capitalism, the coming of democracy, spread of the press - it is necessary to introduce, as we know, the concept of public sphere. With this term Habermas intends to identify a new social space, collocated between civil society (of which it is however a part) and the state, within which private citizens - emerging middle class, illuminated intellectuals, etc. - claim both the right to public discussion, and to the formation of a collective approach and a "general will", and, lastly, the demand for "publicity" of the decision-making process and the control of power. There cannot therefore be democracy (i.e. revolution against privilege) without a public sphere, and there cannot be rational confrontation and affirmation of rights without a public space, accessible to all, in which one or the other may be exercised.

But what can we call the output, the result of this process - at the same time critical and emancipative, but also rational and universal - which develops from civil society as a new form of intermediation between individual interests and state, between reforming instances and control/transparency of power, between reason and revolution? The term which was coined to define this new phenomenon during the eighteenth century - by Rousseau around 1744 but also by Necker, the Finance Minister under Louis XV1, in 1787 - was that of *public opinion*. It became in turn the foundation of democracy , the lymph of popular sovereignty, the "incorruptible tribunal" to
2

which all may appeal , but also the ambit of "criticism" of power, the result of the "rational

3

dialogue" against obscurantism, the process in which the "general will" is formed against partisan interests. Public opinion - a typically immaterial phenomenon which, however, appears as a cognitive and symbolic process equipped with "potential agency", i.e. able to enact, to practise publicly, to manifest the consequences of its direction - thus becomes one of the pillars of modern

4

society because it embodies the values of the enlightenment and bourgeois revolution, of democracy and democratic participation, of universalism and individualism, of the division of powers but also the demand for "transparency" and "publicity". It is a banner to raise, a foundation to invoke, a space for liberation, a form of generalised and un-negotiable empowerment.

As Habermas had underlined, however, and as Thompson (1998) was to argue in greater depth, a similar transformation of social relations, the ambits of sociality and political claims could not have taken place without the advent of the communication revolution represented by the birth of the media. On this subject Thompson, in concluding his list of the characteristics of the media,

---

1 Some speak today of "second modernity", "radical modernity", or even "post-modernity" to define the current phase of development of western society (Lyotard 1981, Giddens 1994, Salamone 1999).
2 Already in 1690 Locke speaks of a "law of opinion and reputation" as the foundation of social life; in 1740 Hume theorises that every government is founded on opinion.
3 Bentham, writing in 1816, speaks of public opinion as the "tribunal" of politics, which may make mistakes, but remains "incorruptible" (Matteucci 1997).
4 The idea that public opinion is a collective phenomenon, of a cognitive and symbolic nature, marked by a willingness for action (potential agency), and consequent mobilisation, is thematised in Grossi (2004).

emphasises "the fifth characteristic of mass communication… implies the public circulation of symbolic forms. The assets of the media industry are in principle accessible to a plurality of receivers… [This] accessibility .. has important consequences for the way of understanding the distinction between public sphere and private sphere. The fact that they be accessible in principle to a plurality of receivers transforms media products into intrinsically public goods, in the sense of goods 'open' or 'available to the public'." (1998: 49-50).

Without the development of a new communicative infrastructure in society - media communication - the public sphere (which is not the *polis* or *agorà* as in Ancient Greece, but a social dimension which goes beyond the sharing of the same space and the same time for doing and discussing politics)   therefore could not have been constituted and spread. The media - at the beginning only the printed press (newspapers and books) - create the conditions for the formation, on the one hand, of a speaking public able to generalise its ideas even beyond the placed rational confrontation (*hic et nunc*), shortening the times for the spread of knowledge and ideas, of political positions, speeding up the circulation of these opinions. And, on the other hand, in order for a reading public (or audience) to develop, which is distant in space and time, able to interact not only through face-to-face locutions but also through texts (printed verbalisations or audiovisual sequences), thus making the public sphere truly accessible and hence universal for the first time.

It is in this perspective that the link between media and public opinion appears constitutive and founding. Not only for modern society, seen as a social organisation characterised by a form of government on popular basis (representative democracy), by a system of weights and counterweights between the state institutions and between the latter and civil society, by a set of values - freedom, equality, justice, rights - which express a model for civic cohabitation founded not on force but on reason, not on privilege but on right, not on imposition but on consensus; but also, more generally, for social - cognitive, symbolic, affective - relations which characterise everyday life, public life, individual and collective experience, the cultural dynamics of sociality.

Historically speaking, the most important relational form which distinguishes this historic phase from the previous ones (or from the successive ones) is exemplified by the primate of public opinion as a principle of political legitimacy and collective interaction, on the one hand, and the mediatisation of the symbolic and cognitive dimension of experience itself (individual and collective, social and political) as the basis for public communication, on the other.

Even before the "psychology of the crowd" (of which Le Bon 1963, and Tarde 1989 speak), the "political propaganda" (Lasswell 1927), the theories of the "magic bullet" or "limited effects" (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach 1995), the "hidden persuaders" in advertising (Packard 1968), before the "one-dimensional man" (Marcuse 1967), the "show business society" (Debord 1990), the

"electronic republic" (Grossman, 1997) or the already mentioned "videocracy" (Sartori 1999), in order to truly and fully understand the role and the function of the media in present-day post-industrial societies, we must start from the recognition of this privileged nexus between media and public opinion. It is in the identification (and analysis) of this interweaving that we may better interpret the current formation of societies in late modernity - increasingly "glocalised", interconnected and hyper-polled - because the interaction between public-private communication, attitudes made public (opinions) and media arenas is the principal foundation (although not the only or necessarily the best one) for the current form of developed sociality which marks and distinguishes the western world from other cultural traditions and other civilisations.

2. Mediatisation of the public sphere and public opinion

Already in the second half of the nineteenth century the very idea of democracy, and hence the notion of public sphere and public opinion, was starting to undergo considerable transformations following the process of the growing social inclusion of all citizens, promoted, from above, by national states (Mosse 1975, Ginsberg 1986) and claimed, from below, by social (and socialist) movements. This was then joined by the opening up of a cultural market, an industry of communication, a collective imagery increasingly fascinated (and enchained) by media logics.

Not only the typical-ideal model of liberal democracy - as underlined by the concerned observations made by Tocqueville and Bryce at the end of the 19 century - but above all Habermas's concept of "public sphere" and "public opinion" related to the proto-bourgeois model, however, started to be in crisis. In both cases, the change in the social context - the industrial society in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century - produced on the one hand that phenomenon which Thompson (1998) calls the "transformation of visibility", and on the other, that trend which other authors describe as the "mediatisation of public opinion" (Engel Lang & Lang 1983, Price 1992, Lazar 1995, Grossi 2004).

The transformation of visibility - i.e. the way in which power, authority and leadership are visible and controlled by civil society - leads to a progressive disembedding of the public sphere from the space-time co-presence: in a society in which "publicity" is increasingly accessible to all without spatial (and temporal) limits through the media, the public sphere becomes increasingly pervasive and shared (McLuhan's famous metaphor of the "global village" 1967), without being necessarily bound to a common, tangible space (the street, cafés, salons, public places). On this

subject, Thompson (1998: 185) explains, "with the development of the new communication media… fame or publicity have separated from the idea of dialogical conversation in a shared place. It has lost its anchorage in space and become non-dialogical, increasingly linked to the particular kind of visibility produced by, and accessible thanks to the media (television in particular)".

Although there have been various critics of the loss of interactivity and discursiveness in this new "mediated publicity", what is important to emphasise is above all the structural transformation which is being created, from an idea of "public sphere" for the few (or for an enlightened elite) to a "public sphere" for many (or for all), which the transformation of democratic, industrial, consumer and mediatised society has ended by promoting and imposing. This process - which is the result of the thrust of multiple, subjective and objective, phenomena - seems in actual fact to enact a veritable "generalisation" and "democratisation" of access to the public sphere, not only in principle but in substantive terms, although this may only take place through the media and the processes of media logic linked to them .

6

The public sphere, moreover, has to take into account the growing intromission of the state, which tends both to condition it, and to subtract it from the total control of civil society (Habermas had already stigmatised this trend, speaking of "re-politicisation of the social sphere" and of "demonstrative and manipulative publicity") . The more its actual accessibility spreads to the whole

7

collective society, the more the state seeks to condition it to obtain consensus and social integration (Ginsberg 1986). The public sphere consequently loses its function, we might say, of the claim (and emancipation) of private citizens for political power and becomes rather the place of confrontation-competition, the arena in which reciprocal influences and symbolic conflicts between state, parties, movements and civic society in general are brought to bear.

At the same time, the entwining between public sphere, cultural market and the market of ideas is growing: the audience of speakers is joined not only by the audience of readers/viewers, but more generally by the consumer public. Access to the public sphere does not only involve a loss of dialogicity (because the publicity is mediated), although the process of cognitive interaction, of the negotiation of meanings is not thereby neglected; but it also produces a differentiation in the roles of participation within it - who is speaking, who is listening, who is informed, who consumes - and hence establishes different levels of social involvement, not all central but not for this reason residual or irrelevant.

---

[5] See the two fundamental works of critical analysis of American democracy: A. de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1962 (original edition 1840) and J. Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 1933 (original edition 1888).

[6] For a synthetic presentation of the theory of media logic and its supporters, Altheide and Snow, cfr. McQuail 2001 and Mazzoleni 2004.

[7] Cfr. Habermas, 1974, pp. 211 and 274.

"Mediated publicity" is therefore not only a product of the new forms of "de-spatialised", "de-temporalised" and "quasi interactive" communication, typical of the media, but is also the result of an "industry of consciousness" and a cultural market in which individuals, in actual fact, are not only citizens but also clients, not only producers but also consumers.

This process of transformation-modification of the role and nature of the public sphere also has inevitable consequences on public opinion itself. As we have spoken of "mediatisation of culture", to indicate a new form of production and circulation of the symbolic forms in modern society following the presence of the media (Thompson 1998), we may also speak of mediatisation of public opinion, intending the important influence the media take on in the very process of formation of individual and collective opinions, and in the birth of a public opinion to a large extent mainly influenced (or, even conditioned) by the different functioning of the public sphere itself. Engel Lang & Lang (1983: 7) have clearly explained on this subject: "One cannot understand the formation of political opinion without taking this into account [e.g., the creation of a symbolic environment by the organized news media], for all of us live in a world of meanings, some of which are *mediated* … are outside the range of direct experience and only insofar as knowledge about them is communicated".

In the ideal-typical model, public opinion therefore appeared mainly as a discursive process which arose and developed in the public sphere of co-presence (space-time) and dialogicity (face-to-face interaction), and was characterised by self-direction (the social actors self-promoted it), while in the new context it appears as a more complex, ambivalent phenomenon. It is a public, but "mediated" process, it is discursive but not necessarily dialogical, it is nourished by information and knowledge which is mainly "pre-packaged", it is often hetero-directed (by institutional actors), it is the ground for influence and conquest not only by civil society but also by state institutions, the media system, specialised bodies (opinion pollsters, public relations firms, marketing offices, lobbies, etc.).

This phenomenon however should not be seen - as certain radical approaches sometimes seem to suggest - as the end or the negation both of the role of the public sphere and of the function of public opinion in societies in the second modern period. On the contrary, it should be interpreted - parallel with the evolution of the forms of democracy, the coming of mass society, the consumer revolution, the development of opinion polls, the spread of the Internet and the dynamics of globalisation - as the complexification and historicisation of a cognitive process which is as immaterial as it is fundamental to our collective society, which must be studied and contextualised first and foremost for what it is (and not only for what it ought to be).

The mediatisation of public opinion, i.e. the process of forming individual and collective opinions through mediated information and experiences, but also the "public presentation" of these opinions in the symbolic arena constructed and nourished by the media, tends, on the one hand, to pose the question of the process of activation of public opinion in our society in a different way, while on the other it still makes it possible to question more clearly, to analyse in greater depth, the mechanisms underlying the functioning of public opinion in a society like ours, in which the relationship between "mediacracy" and "pollingcracy" tends to become increasingly stringent and pervasive. To this end we need to elaborate a new empirical conceptualisation both of the public sphere and of public opinion in the light of the new scenario of the representative democracies in the second modern age.

3. The "demoscopic field" theory and the redefinition of the concept of public opinion

In seeking to analytically redefine the notion of public opinion as a concrete product of social interaction, we must first introduce a concept specifically devoted to identifying the social reference ambit for the set of the cognitive and symbolic practices linked to the production, processing and appearance of the dynamics of opinion. This notion "takes the name of 'demoscopic field', and is used to identify the ambit, the social space of formation and of action of public opinion in present-day post-industrial societies" (Grossi 2004: 94).

Public opinion must in fact be seen essentially as a process of interaction and collective communication which takes place in a social space (the public sphere), characterised by numerous referents (individuals, groups, publics audiences, political actors), by structures and organisations (the media, lobbies and public relations, institutions, parties, movements) and by cognitive systems (values, convictions, trends, preferences, opinions) which enter into competition-confrontation in producing convergence and influence in order to promote consensus, trust, legitimisation, or to arouse dissent, criticism and de-legitimisation. The production of public opinion thus appears as a particular form of *agency* , which occurs in a specific space, in a "field" - to use a concept dear to

8

Bourdieu's sociology (1978) - within which we may distinguish different constituting elements: subjects, structures, dynamics and relative interrelations. It is an assigned, specialised field, which is broader than the traditional public sphere and "mediated publicity" in that it embraces an *all-*

---

[8] The use of the term "agency" to indicate not only the cognitive but also the pragmatic dimension of public opinion underlines on the one hand its intrinsic nature of "force" or "energy" (Engel & Lang 1983, I. Crespi 1997), and on the other relates to the conceptualisation made by Giddens (1990) who with this term defines a stratified model of agent characterised by three elements: discursive awareness, practical awareness and unconscious.

comprehensive social space - tendentiously transversal both to the public and to the private, to the state and civic society - and which functions according to particular rules and dynamics, the outcome not only of the social evolution but also of the complexification of modern democracies.

This "demoscopic field" is therefore both a consequence of social differentiation - like the "political field" or the "cultural field", to again follow Bourdieu's theory - in that it is a specialised ambit in which the dynamics of opinion are activated, compared, appear and are analysed and where the public opinion process is constructed, but it is also (and above all) a social ambit in which the single actors compete, struggle and confront each other according to different positions and to different cognitive and symbolic backgrounds available, both individually and collectively.

Studying public opinion in a concrete way as a particular type of social agency consequently means firstly defining the boundaries, rules and components of this specific ambit of collective interaction which we call "demoscopic field".

The main characteristic of the demoscopic field is thus its articulation in various components, which underlie the formation of public opinion and which concern both the referents (producers or consumers), and the various types of cognitive products (opinions) making up its demoscopic output, and the channels and systems which promote or facilitate its circulation, and lastly the devices which make possible the crystallisation and final outcome of the very process of opinion-building (cfr Table 1).

Table 1 - The elements constituting the demoscopic field

Dimensions or levels	*Constituting elements*			
First dimension: social referents (producers and consumers)	Citizens and publics	Media and agenda	Elites and leaders	
Second dimension: cognitive outputs (opinion and opinions)	Extended opinion	Qualified opinion	Common opinion	Media opinion
Third dimension: channels and bearers	Central channels: the media	Peripheral channels: hearsay and territorial micro-ambits	Additional channels: demonstrations and opinion-bearers	
Fourth dimension: devices	The cognitive entrepreneur	The mediated public debate	The climate of opinion	

Source: re-elaboration from Grossi (2004)

In synthesis, the demoscopic field is therefore the environment, the appointed social space in which public opinion is formed, circulates and appears. What characterises it, as we have just seen, is the presence of various components - referents, organs, opinions, channels - which indicate not only the complexity and empirical division of the phenomenon itself, but the strongly interactive, trans-active, cooperative (and hence in a way systemic) nature of the process of public opinion formation. This leads us to think of public opinion as the result of a set of communicative, cognitive and symbolic flows (rational and emotive, individual and collective, interior and exterior), which is never the unilateral product of a single component (public opinion as "elite opinion" or "mass opinion") but appears instead as the result of a process of construction and multiple influence - its *pluralistic genesis* - marked by a contractual logic, a competitive and dialectic tension, but also by differences of position and competences in exerting *cognitive influence*, which remains the main strategic resource of public opinion in democratic societies.

The demoscopic field consequently appears not only as a system of multi-dimensional interrelations between several dimensions or levels - which must be taken apart and analysed in its single substantive components - but more properly speaking appears as the ambit of "social construction" of that immaterial and still hyper-realist entity which is public opinion itself.

This new conceptualisation both of public opinion and of its assigned field of action however requires us in the meantime to stop and recall some of the consequences which the notion of demoscopic field involves, not so much on the formation of public opinion as on its role and function in contemporary democratic societies.

The main consequence concerns the relation between the notion of demoscopic field and the idea of public sphere, to which public opinion has historically been linked. The demoscopic field, seen as the social space of cognitive and symbolic conflict for the conquest of an actual public good - "public opinion" -, appears much wider and more pervasive than the traditional public sphere. It has not limited its range of action to that space of social and collective interaction which is collocated between state (government) and civil society, and, within the later, between social environment and intimate sphere of the private, but has progressively affected all of society to become a second dimension of sociality, which is transversal and inclusive, increasingly de-spacialised and virtual. In this new dimension of publicity all the main social actors, many institutions and organs, confront each other through complex forms of interaction and collective representation oriented to make public opinion the stakes *par excellence* of democratic life and civic cohabitation. Not only in the strictly political environment - although above all in it, in that it is linked to the authoritative decisions and the management of material and symbolic resources - but also in many other ambits, from economy to finance, from justice to ethics, from religion to life-

worlds, public opinion becomes both a normative reference point and a terrain for competition between values, interests and drives, whether they be individual or group.

This semantic shift of the very idea of public opinion - from "tribunal" or "compensation

chamber", according to the two original ways of conceiving the phenomenon in the 18 and 19 ^(th) ^(th)

centuries, to the privileged object of political and democratic competition (the "stakes" to legitimately win and keep power) - is also the result of several more or less implicit principles, which now regulate its role and importance.

The first is "the principle of *generalised inclusion*: all social subjects, whatever their roles, positions, degree of influence and type of power, are legitimately part of it as referents (producers and/or consumers). From the homeless to the President of the Republic, from the immigrant to the famous 'opinion-maker', from the man in the street to the opinion pollsters, they all tend to claim their own right to an opinion and demand to exercise it without limits of position or status" (Grossi 2004: 128).

The second principle is more linked to the concept itself of *influence*: everyone may seek to influence, from above and from below, the dynamics of opinion; everyone may guide and persuade collective society, through debates, discussions, speeches, declarations, strategies of symbolic pressure, publication of surveys, eye-catching and spectacular public behaviour; everyone accepts the game of influence as an eminently rhetorical activity (Billig 1995), i.e. which is constitutively oriented to conceiving language, discourse and argumentation as a fundamentally persuasive cognitive and interactive activity. Powers and counter-powers are measured above all in their capacity to influence the cognitive orientation of others, in seeking consensus and symbolic conformity, in winning the "stakes" which are *the alignment of public opinion* to one's own positions or own solutions. The right to inclusion thus merges with the right to influence and persuade, and opinion "appears increasingly less a mere 'expressing', 'testifying' of an inner orientation, and more and more a 'dynamic tool' of pressure, involvement and intermediation with others" (Grossi 2004: 128).

Lastly, the third principle concerns the idea of *differentiated participation*: there are different possible ways of participating in the public opinion process, not necessarily as producers, but also as consumers (audience). But this diversity of roles should not be seen only as a demonstration of acquiescence or an expression of passiveness. Even if it is limited to consuming or assisting, it claims equal dignity in then assessing what it sees, listens to and consumes (for example, through TV talk shows); it demands to accept or reject what is proposed or broadcast (there is an implicit "right to cognitive recess" even towards the leader or party one has voted for); it accepts the "division of cognitive work" but attributes to this a mere functional and not

substantive valence (those who "make" opinions do not automatically succeed in imposing them). This implies, on the one hand, a more realistic, credible vision of the dynamics of opinion in a complex society - not everyone may be a protagonist in the same way in the cognitive confrontation -, but it also involves a revaluation of all the forms of participation in the dynamics of opinion, even those apparently less visible and recognised.

4. The opinion-building process: the devices

For a correct interpretation of the public opinion process, however, it is not enough to fraction and describe it in its phases or components within the demoscopic field - perhaps accentuating the importance and hence the influence of this or that element - but we must also explain on what conditions the process of opinion-building may give rise to public opinion. This outcome involves a series of problems of considerable importance which must be interpreted: how it is coagulated and sedimented, or how it fails to crystallise in a stable, lasting fashion; how it is oriented in one direction or another (how it may change, even in longer or shorter terms); how it becomes hegemonic and not only majority (i.e. how it is interiorised consensually and not only accepted exteriorly); how it exercises its role of influence and legitimisation in the political (and social) public sphere.

To answer these questions, we intend to put forward the hypothesis that within the demoscopic field the outcome of the opinion-building process is linked to certain *devices* (or operative factors) which are the principal facilitators of the transformation of the opinion dynamics into actual *public opinion* . These devices are the elements which, at the same time, facilitate the
9

conclusion of the process but also super-determine it, i.e. they condition its formation and final direction within certain limits.

4.1. The cognitive entrepreneur
As is well-known in socio-political tradition, opinion is fairly united on the idea that any public opinion dynamics which takes on a social and collective dimension demands the presence of actors with the role and function of "opinion leadership". This presence is determining because of the setting up of the process of forming and articulating public opinion, in that it is generally produced according to a controversial, socially relevant theme or issue, which opinion leadership (one or more actors) takes on the task of raising, promoting, framing and focussing the aim of a

---

[9] On the distinction between opinion dynamics and actual public opinion cfr. Grossi (2004).

presentation and public discussion. In this sense, Habermas's original model which does not postulate the presence of any "facilitator", "gatekeeper" or "promoter" of the dynamics of opinion - assigning to each single citizen the role of opinion-builder or diffuser - appears rightly insufficient if related to present-day societies, in which even the social division of "cognitive" work has reached inevitable levels of complexity and articulation.

We find more convincing therefore the emphasis put forward on various sides (Deutch 1970, Luhmann 1978, Nimmo 1978, Price 1992, Lazar 1995, I. Crespi 1997) that the public opinion process cannot be spontaneously generated, but always demands - both in its *top-down* activation (power elite) and *bottom-up* (movements, groups, associations) - the presence and the role of some form of "opinion leadership" which carries out two specific tasks:

- selecting, highlighting, focussing attention on certain (and not other) themes, certain (and not other) opinions, certain (and not other) controversies;

- promoting, supporting, framing, interpreting, directing for public discussion these cognitive and symbolic nuclei which subsequently become the subject of comparison and negotiation leading to the formation of public opinion through the typical dynamics of the demoscopic field.

This device-figure, which is necessary for the development of the public opinion process

and which was, as we know, originally labelled as "opinion-leader" in Lazarfeld *et al.* (1944) and Katz & Lazerfeld's (1968) well-known model, should today be redefined and re-interpreted with the term of "*cognitive entrepreneur*" .
10

The *cognitive entrepreneur* may be defined as that particular kind of social actor (individual, group or organisation) which takes on the task (and the risk) of promoting, activating and guiding a determinate opinion process of social and collective importance as a bearer both of interests - the cognitive entrepreneur *invests in immaterial goods* - and in competences - knows how to present issues, knows how to communicate problems, is able to express well-argued approaches, and possesses an "opinion capital" to be enhanced in the public sphere.

In this sense the cognitive entrepreneur may be found in every ambit of the demoscopic field, within the various kinds of opinion-producers: he/she may belong to the elite or to the "attentive" public, and may also be expressed by the media or emerge from the "broader" public. He/she is not necessarily a manifestation of institutional power (the formal leader), or only the expression of the interpersonal networks in everyday life (the opinion leader), but is in any case the bearer of "competence" and active and entrepreneurial "involvement".

---

10 On the concept of "entrepreneur"- applied to politics - see the classic works by Schumpeter (1964) and Downs (1957). In particular on the notion of "entrepreneur of collective action", see the discussion in Biorcio (2003).

The entrepreneur therefore constitutes a "new figure" of opinion communicator and arouser, operating in the demoscopic field as one of the determining factors for the enacting of the cognitive process, since opinion dynamics do not develop simply, "naturally" and exclusively in individual interaction and interpersonal dialogue, but involve much more complex, far-reaching and differentiated trans-active and procedural dynamics in which come into play the apparatus (the media), professionals (the bearers and spokespersons), and the differentiated cognitive products (the various opinions, poll results, correct or incorrect perceptions of opinion dynamics).

Cognitive entrepreneurs are consequently a key-factor, a central device, in the opinion-building process: they are not only decisive in starting up the process and in its development, but are also necessary for its possible conclusion because they are multi-dimensional actors - a formal or informal leader, a pressure group or grassroots movement, a public relations man or "media guru", a professional or voluntary/activist politician - who carry out their entrepreneurship linked to a cause, an issue, a political and symbolic conflict through *influencing communication*, i.e., through interaction oriented to *cognitive hegemony*.

The role of the cognitive entrepreneur in the opinion-building process therefore develops on

two levels: in psychological terms it carries out the function of *priming* [1] (it stimulates collective accessibility to certain issues, thereby inviting the activation of a comparison of opinions); in

sociological terms it carries out the function of *framing* [2] (it defines the discursive situation, supplies the key to interpret the controversy, outlines the alternatives and possible solutions).

In this sense the strategic role of the cognitive entrepreneur figure - replacing the traditional figure of the "opinion leader", one of the key figures in the sociological approach in affirming the primacy of "personal influence" in the social contexts of everyday life - is also linked to the wider inclusiveness of the term itself. It relates to different, articulate types of opinion leadership, all able to carry out the above-mentioned functions, perhaps competing with each other: "*formal" leadership*, which concerns political and institutional exponents and which is collocated in the political system, in social elites, within limited and minority "active publics"; "*communicative" leadership*, which is linked to the gatekeeping roles of information flows, channels and messages circulating in the media and in society (I. Crespi 1997); "*informal" leadership*, constituted by the various "opinion leaders" operating in everyday life and in civic society within small groups, interpersonal relationships between families and friends and work colleagues, territorial microclimates characterising the mass public.

---

[1] The *priming effect*, investigated in social psychology, is linked to the phenomenon of *recency*, i.e. of one of the main factors conditioning the accessibility of concepts when confronting new information (Catellani 1997). The priming effect consequently carried out by the cognitive entrepreneur - often through the media - increases the accessibility of an issue, its visibility and collective "opininability".

[1] On the concept of *framing*, see Bateson (1976) and Goffman (1974).

In the words of I. Crespi (1997: 64) "in this competition, existing patterns of group leadership can significantly affect which opinions will be heard and which will not […] may lend [credibility] to some beliefs, values and interests, and deny to others…To understand fully the emergence of a collective opinion, it is essential to take into account the process of opinion leadership".

4.2. *The mediated public debate*

According to the "discursive" approach (Prince 1992, Sampedro 2000), what characterises public opinion developing within the demoscopic field is also the particular form of interaction which marks it: public debate. Although the interpretations of the various authors may differ on the subject, it is commonly held in this line of interpretation that the notion of public debate constitutes the very idea of public opinion. From this point of view Habermas's conception of the discursive foundation of the public sphere has been revitalised and re-interpreted in the light of the recent "linguistic" and "discursive" theories on the construction of political and social reality .

13

At the same time, what we here intend to identify as a second relevant device for the development of the opinion-building process is a particular type of public debate: *mediated public debate*. It is a peculiar discursive type of "mediated publicity", i.e. of a public sphere to a large extent mediated and de-spatialised, which, although it does not exclude the presence of traditional forms of dialogue and face-to-face discourse, in private and public ambits, appears as the determining (and influencing) factor also for the various forms of "discursive processing" which then appear at the level of everyday life. In other words, the "mediated public debate" is that particular type of dialogue or public discourse which takes place and unfolds in the media area, in which a limited audience of producers and opinion-bearers confronts each other publicly (through the media) in front of an extended audience of *citizens-bystanders*.

There are various reasons to argue that mediated public debate constitutes one of the key devices in the formation of public opinion, although it must be re-interpreted in the light of the transformations which have taken place in the public sphere (and hence cannot be exclusively measured with the Habermas parameters of dialogicity, of spatial-temporal co-presence and rationality). The first - and most important - of these reasons is that it remains the central

14

normative reference in the theory of democracy, even in a society which has several public spheres, different forms of "publicity", a high social differentiation of roles, a wide-spread mediation of politics and of cognitive and symbolic dynamics.

1 On the so-called "discursive turning point" in social sciences see also Giddens (1990), Contarello & Mazzara (2000), Sebastiani (2001) and Jensen (2002).
1 On this specific argument see Thompson's criticism (1998) of Habermas.

This centrality of the public debate still remains decisive in the democracy model prevalent today in the western world, which is presented and legitimised - for good or bad - as a form of government based on the "discussion test" . It is however a discussion which reveals some

15

particular features, as we have just underlined: it is almost always a *mediated discussion* (i.e. it no longer takes place in public spaces but in the pervasive and de-spatialised publicity of the media), which maintains public accessibility, and indeed broadens it, but reduces direct dialogicity, and limits the opportunity to intervene personally ; the protagonists of the debate are mainly leaders

16

competing with each other, bearers of public opinion, experts - i.e. cognitive entrepreneurs - rather than ordinary citizens, and hence the extended audiences (the majority of the population) take part in the discussion through "communicative representative" rather than by direct participation; the logics of the discussion - because of the presence of the media arena, the strategies of influence, relations between leaders and followers - cannot respond only to criteria of discursive rationality, but also brings into play emotive, symbolic and rhetorical components which are also necessary only to capture attention and not necessarily to take decisions or crystallise line-ups (Luhmann 1978).

This transformation of public discussion into *mediated public debate* (on a scale which may be local, national or global), however, according to some authors produces negative consequences: not so much in the sense that it accentuates the distinction of role between players and spectators of opinion dynamics, or because it surrogates a face-to-face dialogicity with a mediated quasi-interaction, but for more relevant, substantive reasons.

Price, for example, underlines that "large-scale publics differ dramatically from smaller face-to-face groups in the technologies used for communicating among members [...] Large publics require more systematic means of exchanging ideas - not just free-flowing discussion, but mass-mediated exchange and organised opinion gathering and distribution (e.g. editorials, letters and opinion polls) - to establish the fund of shared considerations in the public domain" (Price 1992: 77).

The strategic contribution of *mediated public debate* as a further central device for the carrying out and possible conclusion of the opinion-building process, on the one hand seems therefore to re-launch the idea of public opinion as a communicative and discursive process typical of a democratic, shared conception of political and social life, while on the other hand it raises questions not so much on the "demonstrative and manipulative" nature of mediated publicity or on

---

1 On the relationship between democracy and public discourse, within the processes of globalisation, see also Schmidt (1999).

16According to some authors, the development of the new information technologies might invert this trend, creating new forms of synchronic or a-synchronic political interaction through the Web. But on this point research outcomes are still contradictory (van Dijk 2000).

the subrogating or "symbolic" function of discussion - as certain critical but too normative readings would see it -, as rather on the growing "cannibalisation" which this type of public debate tends to assume compared with other discursive forms present in society.

4.3. The climate of opinion

While the cognitive entrepreneur is the actor who sets up, solicits and lays down the opinion-building dynamics, and the mediated public debate constitutes its principal interactive and projective approach, the final result and the conclusive outcome of the process itself, i.e. the transformation of individual opinions into public opinion is to a large extent also determined by a third device present in the demoscopic field: the *climate of opinion*.

Following the theoretic paradigm of E. Noelle-Neumann (1984), the climate of opinion is seen as a second cognitive and symbolic level present in society and of which the single citizens are synchronically aware. They perceive - according to mechanisms which today have still not been empirically examined - "which way the wind blows", i.e. in which direction and to what extent of sharing a certain collective approach has already been installed in collective society. In other words, when they process or reveal an individual conviction or opinion regarding a determinate subject, individual people are at the same time aware - through processes of inference which stem from their social interactions and the stock of information available - of the orientation considered as majority on the theme in question present in society. This does not necessarily or immediately involve the reduction of the "cognitive dissonance" or the accepting of "pressure to conform", but in any case it generates a perception of the degree of agreement (or alignment) between one's own cognitive position and the one presumed present (and winning) in collective society.

In Italy, for example, a different kind of political and social reaction was recorded between 1994 - the year when Berlusconi's first centre-right government issued the so-called "save the thieves" law on the limiting of preventive imprisonment, but was then forced to withdraw it due to the mobilisation of public opinion in favour of the Milan magistrates who were following up episodes of corruption in the political class - and 2002-03 when the new centre-right government launched numerous laws - from the abolition of "false accounting" to the suspension of court cases for the five highest state positions - without public opinion reacting substantially and in unison to such decisions which were equally detrimental both for the constitution and for autonomy of the magistracy.

This difference in reactions may only be explained by taking into account the change in the opinion climate present in the two situations, and therefore leads us to hypothesise that the climate itself may be a decisive factor in making possible or impossible the crystallisation of individual

opinions within public opinion, which involves - as we have already observed - not only the appearance of an explicit orientation of opinion but also of forms of agency linked to it (public expressions, letters, protest demonstrations, public forms of opposition and dissent).

Something similar had already occurred in the Watergate case in 1973, when initially the press campaign carried out by the media against Nixon, or collective perception of the episodes of political espionage against the Democrats had not been sufficient to set up that process of agenda-building which only in the following months was to lead American public opinion to take sides and mobilise against Nixon and force him to resign. The keystone of the change in "climate" is thus synthesised by Engel Lang & Lang: "Watergate had broken into public consciousness only after the coverage had created a sense of crisis. [In spring 1973 in fact]… a significant segment of the citizenry was seriously concerned about the disclosures and wanted the government to do something" (Engel Lang & Lang 1983: 57).

The climate of opinion is therefore a decisive factor for the resolution of the public opinion process. If individual or collective actors perceive this consistency (or parallelism) between activated, negotiated and processed opinion orientations, and the climate perceived as widespread and shared, then the conclusion of the opinion-building process and its expression as a cognitive and symbolic reality present in the public sphere is more likely to have a positive conclusion. On the contrary, if the actors record a divergence or a lack of consistency between the two cognitive dimensions, this process may not be accomplished (or not appear) as a potential agency - support or threat - and hence not be visible as an autonomous entity able to influence, offset or legitimate political power.

This hypothesis was implicitly put forward by Noelle-Neuman (1984) when he spoke of the emergence of a "dual climate of opinion" in the electoral campaigns in Germany. Individual citizens had to take into account two different opinion climates: the first as the result of the interaction and experiences taking place in everyday life and of interpersonal relationships (which we might call "social climate of opinion"); the second, as an effect of exposure to the media, which derives rather from inferences arising from the perception of collective orientations through journalistic mediation (and which we might describe as "media opinion climate"). In both cases the possibility of publicly supporting one's opinions and points of view - thus enabling the setting up of an efficacious public opinion process - is strongly conditioned (if not directly prevented) by the perception of an unfavourable or decidedly contrary climate.

From this point of view, we may seem to observe a considerable change in the cognitive and symbolic scenario characterising present-day societies. On the one hand, we must record a multiplication of opinion climates, as brought about by the same processes of differentiation and

disembedding which mark contemporary social systems (Giddens 1994); on the other hand, we may see that these climates tend to be less lasting and more changeable than they were in the past, perhaps also due to the interdependence of the contexts in which they are produced and the accentuation of the processes of "glocalisation" favouring the creation of opinion climates differentiated by their different arenas and distinct social reference ambits.

5. New media and digital democracy: which public opinion in the post-modern society?

During the preparations for the Iraq War, when American intervention seemed decided and no state or institution appeared able to prevent it, in referring to the numerous pacifist demonstrations (and the poll data on opinions against the war), the *New York Times* coined the term of World Public Opinion to indicate the only counter-power able to oppose Bush and the leadership of the USA. This process of "globalisation" in cognitive and symbolic dynamics - which crosses national boundaries, moves in an international arena, and deals with typically global themes and issues - is also the result of a transformation process within the media and information technology industry. The third communications revolution - after printing and the coming of audiovisuals (radio-cinema-television) - concerns so-called digital communication: communication mediated by the computer (CMC), the Internet and World Wide Web, information and communications technologies (ICT).

The relationship between these new media and public opinion to a certain extent modifies the frame we have outlined so far. We are beginning to speak of "digital democracy" (Hacker & van Dijk 2000), "virtual communities" (Reinhgold 1994), and "global public sphere" (Parks 2001) to indicate the impact which the new (interactive, multimedia, high speed, without boundaries but at

the same time selective and personalised) [17] information and communication technologies tend to produce both on the formation and circulation of opinions, on collective political participation, and on the functioning of democracy itself.

Once again - in the transition from a post-industrial society (Touraine 1970) to a network or information society (Castells 2002) - we may therefore find the fundamental link between media (or rather "new media"), public opinion and democracy. By changing the nature and the characteristics of the technological supports through which the communicative process (and hence social interactions) take place, however, the very formation and construction of opinion dynamics are modified. On the one hand, the public (and also the mediated) sphere becomes broader (global),

---

17 For the characteristics of the new communication technologies, cfr. Van Dijk (2002) and Bentivegna (2002).

multiplies (we speak of *micro-spheres, meso-spheres* and *macro-spheres*) [18], and tends to become

hybrid, in that the distinction between public and private becomes weaker, and is continually confused and contaminated (van Dijk 2002).

On the other hand, public opinion - in a way still kept unitary and compact on a national basis by the old media - also tends to multiply into many different public opinions due to the progressive weakening of territorial boundaries, of filters and roles of intermediation which are bypassed by the highly individualised, direct, interactive structure of the Web, in which one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many communication flows co-exist. Lastly, both in its participative dimension and in its expressive and symbolic expression - to say nothing of the possible gathering and verification mechanisms of electoral consensus through the new personalised technologies (electronic voting) - democracy itself appears affected by these transformations concerning the "hyper-mediation" of politics and of public opinion in the so-called *cyberspace*.

In order to seek to illustrate the (presumed or real, manifest or latent) changes which the new media are introducing in opinion dynamics, we may start from two different ways of reading the impact of ICT on democracy. Two perspectives which respectively relate to a positive, enthusiastic and progressive vision of the new communications technologies and of their role, or on the contrary to a problematic, critical and pessimistic point of view on their real potential.

The first conception is of a strong democracy (direct, participated democracy) which should now be finally possible through the new media (Barber 1984). On this subject, Raniolo observes that "technological innovations, especially interactive ones such as the Internet and some of its applications as in the 'civic nets', create spaces for a re-found leading role for citizens. They integrate the customary channels of representation, since they offer tools for direct participation which bypass the traditional social and institutional mediators […] enable individuals to influence … the outcome of the final decision" (Raniolo 2003: 174).

In this direction the new media should not only re-activate democratic participation, make a deliberative role of opinion dynamics truly possible, but would seem to concretise the myth of "direct democracy", of the "self-government of citizens", against the distortions and anomalies of the old "representative democracy". The affirmation of the "democracy of the people" of which Manin (1995) spoke would therefore be like the third evolutionary phase after "parliamentarism" and "party democracy".

---

[18] The reference is to the distinction put forward by Keane (2000), which suggests a diversification of public spheres between "micro" - local, everyday ambit -, "meso" - national ambit - and "macro" - global, international ambit. A different distinction, but again in the name of complexification, is that used by Sampedro (2000) between central public sphere and peripheral spheres.

Strong democracy thus assigns a new role to the media and to public opinion: now a direct relationship might be set up between citizens and leaders, between citizens and political power without those forms of intermediation (and stratification) which the old media (television) demanded - journalists, entertainers, experts, opinion makers. At the same time, ICTs would create the conditions for the formation - through virtual communities, newsgroups, mailing lists, electronic mail, blogs, the sites of movements, groups and associations, etc. - of a more informed, self-organised and potentially consultative and deliberative public opinion with its political representatives, the government and leaders.

Bentivegna (2002) in particular underlines that "*e-democracy*" seems to be marked by the following peculiar dimensions: "The first dimension to introduce is definitely the one which relates to the widening of opportunities for access to information… what was once the exclusive prerogative of experts in the field… is today accessible to anyone interested […] The second dimension is that of the activation of communication flows of a vertical nature between citizens and the numerous public institutions … [for example] on-line consultation between citizens so as to gather opinions and points of view regarding the project elaborated […] A third dimension, lastly, refers to the activation of communication flows of a horizontal nature. In this case the flows that are set up involve citizens who discuss, in a sort of virtual public space, issues of political relevance" (Bentivegna 2002: 133-34).

These innovations would therefore have two main positive consequences on democracy: they would make it more direct, more participant, more authentic, but also more efficient, more functioning, more responding to the interests of each single citizen.

The second conception instead is the one which is found in the idea of post-democracy (Crouch 2003), i.e. representing a critical and problematic interpretation which assigns to the new media and ICTs a role not of re-launching and revitalising direct and collective participation in democratic life, but on the contrary as a further factor of fragmentation and social inequality (the "digital divide"), within a growing transformation of social subjects - through the Web - into information consumers instead of into more informed citizens (Sunstein 2001).

The common features of this degeneration (or involution) of democratic principles would be constituted, on the one hand, by the pervasive commercialisation of all the dimensions of social life (first of all the institutions, the public sphere and even the Internet) , and on the other hand, by a

19

"new" social "fragmentation" of which the interactive media would be one of the most evident responsible causes. This "fragmentation" should not be seen in terms of mere individualisation (or even isolation), but be interpreted as a growing segmentation (and hence multiplication) of publics

characterised by the prevalence of interests, values and lifestyles produced by a selective exposure to information, by a strong personalisation of choices of consumption, and a tendency to cultural "filtering" which leads to the exclusion of contact with opinions and orientations which are different from one's own (Sunstein 2001).

It is no coincidence that a scholar like Sunstein, in his recent pamphlet entitled *"Republic.com"*- almost as if to demonstrate that the very idea of a republican state may be absorbed in a commercial Web domain -, underlined that the personalisation of information (which

ICTs not only make possible but even promote for commercial goals) [20] favours a polarisation of knowledge and opinions which generate more fragmentation than social cohesion, more multiplication of partial micro-spheres instead of a single collective public forum, thereby giving the illusion of being able to do without the traditional cultural intermediaries and public spaces, which in any case historically characterised representative democracy.

Essentially, what is paradoxically being questioned is the very possibility of having a true collective debate into virtual public sphere, an effective confrontation between different options and opinions: "this proves the seriousness of the problems if information is treated like a normal consumer product [i.e. chosen only according to one's own private interests]…A system characterised by public discussion and intermediary spaces of a general interest would favour the solution to the problem. An unlimited individual filtering system, defending from undesired exposure, can however create it." (Sunstein 2001: 117-118 [my underlining])

According to this view, therefore, networking would be rather an obstacle to the formation of a democratic public opinion, because the "virtual communities" - emphasised in the first perspective - which it may generate are in fact self-referential, targeted sub-communities, more oriented to re-proposing consensus within themselves than in comparing ideas, problems and different collective approaches. To paraphrase the statements of Bennett & Entman (2001), the new communications technologies - which are so interactive, selective and specialised in both directions - provide the possibility to adapt one's media choices to one's own particular interests, and the old mass audiences thus become increasingly small public niches, less and less characterised by shared communicative (and cultural) experiences, by shared discourses and agendas, and therefore appear less oriented to the formation of an organic participated public opinion.

In this direction we are justified in asking whether the further complexification of the social context, increasingly "globalised" and inter-connected, does not oblige us to reset the nature and

---

[19] In particular on the "commercialisation of citizenry" following the excessive power of the "global company" as an actual institution in post-democratic societies, cfr. Crouch (2003).

[20] For example, Sunstein (2001) quotes the paradoxical case of an on-line daily (ironically called "Daily me"), which may be personalised so as to contain only the kind of news interesting the reader, so that the reader-consumer may finally read only what he/she wants to.

role of the founding link between new media and public opinion, and whether the future may lie in the formation of a World Public Opinion, as the *New York Times* hypothesised a few years ago, or whether the multiplication of the public spheres, the fragmentation of areas of opinion, and the cyberspace model force us to rethink about the nature and function of public opinion in late modern society.

The evolution of the concept of public opinion, moreover, from "incorruptible tribune" or "fourth power" to that of a "stake", i.e. a terrain for competition and conquest by a number of actors to obtain consensus and legitimacy, has already brought about a cognitive and cultural shift of the concept. It remains to be seen whether the historical and democratic function of public opinion may be exhausted - to use Pizzorno's distinctive variables (2001) - in the mere recognition of the identity of the (more or less numerous, more or less organised, more or less inter-related) actors which the new technologies still seem to guarantee, renouncing instead the promotion of freedom of conversion, i.e. the possibility and willingness to change opinion, to hear other people's reasons, accept a deliberative process and make it one's own, which the new technologies - at least in the current phase - do not seem able either to enact or to truly facilitate.

6. A provisional conclusion

Is the end of modernity also the end of democracy? This might once again seem paradoxical, seeing that today we increasingly speak of exporting democracy to the world - with the globalisation of markets, if not with military force (!). However, sociologists should never be surprised by the ambivalence of social phenomena. Today, in fact, there are good reasons - especially of an empirical nature - to see behind this epoch-making paradox an already present contradiction in the origins of modernity itself: democracy (and public opinion) as a both emancipating and constrictive, conflicting and conformist, individual and collective, private and public phenomenon. The full maturity - both historical and institutional - which representative democracy seems to have reached, tends to also coincide with the ideal and material crisis of its very goal: the idea of a representative government founded on delegated participation and on public opinion as an "incorruptible tribune". In this sense it is public opinion which shows a lack of role, in the historical phase in which it seems most adulated, solicited, listened to and glorified. But the mechanisms underlying its transformation within the "information society" - its "hyper-mediatisation" through the Web and the new media - together with a growing neo-populist vision

of government and democratic power, may easily lead it to change its historical function and hence to also modify the nature of democracy itself.

The role of public opinion in a democratic society of the future will not depend on the fact that it be recognised and consulted (even continuatively), but that it have as the object of its opinion-making (and acting) politics *in and for itself*, i.e. the historical and value form that it has assumed in modernity, as a tool for individual and collective emancipation through a set of rights and ideals which are no longer restrainable.

If this does not happen, then we shall truly have to say - whether we like it or not - that we have entered a new social conformation which we should label contemporaneously as post-modern and post-democratic.

REFERENCES

Allport, F.H.
  1969 *Verso una scienza della pubblica opinione*, in M.Livolsi (a cura di*), Comunicazioni e cultura di massa*, Hoepli, Milano (ed. or. 1954)

Altheide, D.L. & Snow, R.P.
  1979 *Media logic*, Sage, Beverly Hills-London

Amoretti, F.
  1997 *La comunicazione politica*, La Nuova Italia Scientifica, Roma

Barber, B.
  1984 *Strong democracy,* University of California Press, Berkeley

Barisione, M. & Mannheimer, R.
  1999 *I sondaggi*, il Mulino, Bologna

Bennet, W.L. & Entman, R.M.
  2001 (edited by), *Mediated politics. Communication in the future of democracy,* Cambridge Univ. Press, New York

Bentivegna, S.
  1995 (a cura di), *Mediare la realtà. Mass media, sistema politico e opinione pubblica*, F. Angeli, Milano
  2002 *Politica e nuove tecnologie della comunicazione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari

Bourdieu, P.
  1976 *L'opinione pubblica non esiste*, in "Problemi dell'informazione", I, 1, pp. 71-88
  1978 *Campo del potere e campo intellettuale*, Lerici, Cosenza

Bryce, J.
  1933 *The American commonwealth*, Macmillan, New York (or. ed. 1888)

Champagne, P.
  1990 *Faire l'opinion. Le nouveau jeux politique*, Ed. de Minuit, Paris

Castells, M.
  2002 *Galassia Internet,* Feltrinelli, Milano

Crouch, C.
  2003 *Postdemocrazia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari

Debord, G.
  1990 *La società dello spettacolo*, De Donato, Bari

DeFleur, M.L. & Ball-Rokeach, S.J.
  1995 *Teorie delle comunicazioni di massa*, il Mulino, Bologna

de Tocqueville, A.
  1962 *La democrazia in America*, Cappelli, Bologna (ed. or. 1840)

Draghi, S.
  1997 *Il sondaggio come profezia*, in P. Ceri (a cura di), *Politica e sondaggi*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, pp.171-188

Engel Lang, G. & Lang, K.
  1983 *The battle for public opinion: the president, the press and the polls during Watergate*, Columbia U.P., New York

Fishkin, J.S.

2002   *La nostra voce. Opinione pubblica & democrazia, una proposta*, Marsilio, Venezia

Giddens, A.
1994   *Le conseguenze dalla modernità*, il Mulino, Bologna

Ginsberg, B.
1986   *The captive public: how mass opinion promotes state power*, Basic Books, New York

Grossi, G.
2003   *Campagne elettorali del III tipo: il ruolo del clima d'opinione*, VIII Convegno internazionale SISE, Venezia, paper on-line
2004   *L'opinione pubblica. Teoria del campo demoscopico*, Laterza, Roma -Bari

Grossman, L.K.
1997   *La repubblica elettronica*, Editori Riuniti, Roma

Habermas, J.
1974   *Storia e critica dell'opinione pubblica*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari (ed. or. 1962)

Hacker, K.L. & van Dijk, J.
2000   (eds.), *Digital democracy. Issues of theory and practice*, Sage, London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi

Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T.W.
1966   *Dialettica dell'illuminismo*, Einaudi, Torino

Keane, J.
2000   *Structural transformations of the public sphere*, in K.L. Hacker & J. van Dijk (eds.), *Digital democracy*, Sage, London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi, pp. 79-89

Landowski, E.
1980   *L'opinion publique et ses porte-parole*, in "Documents de Recherche", 12, pp. 1-35

Lang, K. & Engel Lang, G.
1952   *The unique perspective of television and its effects: a pilot study*, in "American Sociological Review", XVII, pp. 3-12

Lasswell, H. D.
1927   *Propaganda tecnique in the world war,* Knopf, New York

Lazar, J.
1995   *L'opinion publique*, Sirey, Paris

Le Bon, G.
1963   *Psychologie des foules*, P.U.F., Paris (ed. or. 1895)

Lippmann, W.
1963   *L'opinione pubblica*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano (ed. or. 1922)

Luhmann, N.
1978   *Stato di diritto e sistema sociale*, Guida Editori, Napoli

Lyotard, J.F.
1981   *La condizione postmoderna*, Feltrinelli, Milano

Mancini, P.
2003   (a cura di), *La posta in gioco*, Carocci, Roma

Manin, B.
1995   *Principes du gouvernement représentatif*, Flammarion, Paris

Marcuse, H.

1967   *L'uomo a una dimensione*, Einaudi, Torino

Marini, R.
2004   (a cura di), *Comunicare l'Europa*, Morlacchi Editore, Perugia

Matteucci, N.
1997   *Lo stato moderno*, Il Mulino, Bologna

Mazzoleni, G.
2004   *La comunicazione politica*, il Mulino, Bologna

Mc Combs, M.E. & Shaw, D.L.
1972   *The agenda-setting function of mass media*, in "Public Opinion Quarterly", 36, pp. 176-187

McLuhan, M.
1967   *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, il Saggiatore, Milano

McQuail, D.
2001   *Sociologia dei media*, il Mulino, Bologna

Mosse, G. L.
1975   *La nazionalizzazione delle masse*, Il Mulino, Bologna

Noelle-Neumann, E.
2002   *La spirale del silenzio*, Meltemi, Roma

Packard, V.
1968   *I persuasori occulti*, Einaudi, Torino

Parks, C.
2001   *The Internet and the global public sphere,* in Bennet W.L. & Entman R.M. (edited by), *Mediated politics. Communication in the future of democracy,* Cambridge Univ. Press, New York, pp. 75-95

Pizzorno, A.
2001   *Note sulla sfera pubblica*, in A.Besussi e L. Leonini (a cura di), *L'Europa tra società e politica. Integrazione europea e nuove cittadinanze*, Guerini, Milano, pp.17-34

Price, V.
2004   *L'opinione pubblica*, il Mulino, Bologna

Raniolo, F.
2001   *La partecipazione politica*, il Mulino, Bologna

Reinhgold, H.
1994   *Comunità virtuali: parlare, incontrarsi, vivere nel ciberspazio,* Sperling & Kupfer, Milano

Salamone, N.
1999   *Postmodernità*, Carocci, Roma

Sampedro Blanco, V.
2000   *Opiniòn pùblica y democracia deliberativa*, Istmo, Madrid

Sartori, G.
1999   *Homo videns*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari

Sunstein, C.
2001   *Republic.com*, il Mulino, Bologna

Tarde, G.
1989   *L'opinion et la foule*, P.U.F., Paris (ed. or. 1901)

Thompson, J. B.
    1998   *Mezzi di comunicazione e modernità. Una teoria sociale dei media*, il Mulino, Bologna

Touraine, A.
    1970   *La società post-industriale,* il Mulino, Bologna

Van Dijk , J.
    2002   *Sociologia dei nuovi media*, il Mulino, Bologna