

# Opinion Research and Publicness (*Meinungsforschung und Öffentlichkeit*)\*

THEODOR W. ADORNO

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*We present a short introduction to, and the first English language translation of, Theodor W. Adorno's 1964 article, "Meinungsforschung und Öffentlichkeit." In this article, Adorno situates the misunderstanding of public opinion within a dialectic of elements of publicness itself: empirical publicness' dependence on a normative ideology of publicness, and modern publicness' tendency to undermine its own principles. He also locates it in the dual role of mass media as both fora for the expression of opinion and, as he calls them, "organs of public opinion." The introduction provides a discussion of Adorno's reception in the American academy, arguing that contemporary sociological practice should be concerned with the problems Adorno raises. We suggest that Adorno's relegation to the fields of philosophy and aesthetics belies his relevance to empirical sociological research.*

## TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

The front cover of Glynn et al.'s (1999) excellent textbook, *Public Opinion*, sports Norman Rockwell's painting, *Town Meeting*. In the painting, an apparently working-class man is standing at a rail in some sort of public forum. He is disheveled but determined, respectful yet confident. Hat in hand, he looks up, grasping the rail while a cadre of more respectable-looking folk, sitting down, gaze up at him as he prepares to make a point. The speaker's mouth, along with those of everyone else portrayed in the painting, is closed, presumably in deference to an authority located outside the painting.

There is a certain irony in the choice of this scene for the cover of a textbook on contemporary public opinion research. As others (e.g., Bourdieu 1979) have argued, public opinion research tends to conceptualize the public as an aggregation of individual citizens or, at most, as a collection of more or less organized groups vying for influence over policy.<sup>1</sup> Public opinion consists of the aggregation of opinions held by citizens who make up the public; its publicness emerges from its *expression*, whether through discussion, publication, or elections.

*Town Meeting* (and all the more so its more famous successor, *Freedom of Speech*, which graces the cover of Bryan (2004), and in which the speaker appears more defiant and his audience has gained copies of the town's "Annual Report") aptly illustrates this naïve approach to public opinion. Citizens, regardless of class, are capable of

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<sup>1</sup>Indeed, one exemplary quality of Glynn et al. (1999) is that it avoids this reification, encouraging students to ask specifically about the public and industrial origins of public opinion.

expressing privately developed stances in public fora, seamlessly tying private interests to public. Public opinion is not produced, manipulated, silenced, or channeled; it predates public discourse and, when things are working properly, finds transparent representation in that discourse.

It is this irony—and the accompanying misunderstanding of public opinion—that Adorno (1964) addresses in *Meinungsforschung und Öffentlichkeit* (hereafter, *Meinungsforschung*), a 1964 manuscript that we present below in its first English translation. Surpassing the by-now commonplace critique that public opinion research simply aggregates private opinions, Adorno situates this misunderstanding within a dialectic of elements of publicness: empirical publicness' dependence on a normative ideology of publicness, and the tendency of modern publicness to undermine its own principles. He also locates it in the dual role of mass media as both fora for the expression of opinion and, as he calls them, “organs of public opinion.”

Adorno's argument proceeds by making several key points:

- The methodological affinity—based on a common ontology—between public opinion research and market research;
- The extent to which the enlightenment ideal of publicness depends on public opinion being a coherent, discernible object;
- The role of publicness in creating the conditions—mass media, the prevention of “maturation” of the masses—that, in turn, undermine the independence of public opinion;
- The conflation of the public as consumer of information with that of the audience as consumer of the theater, “which demands that something be offered to it”;
- Therefore, Adorno concludes, the study and construction of public opinion are more appropriately *objects* for sociological study than they are *methods* for that study.

In the remainder of this introduction, we consider several of these points in more detail. We conclude by arguing that Adorno's somewhat marginal position in contemporary sociology is unjustified; this article, like some important others, offers insights key to the current practice of social research.

As a sociologist, Adorno is not widely received or regarded as a major figure; his influence is far greater (though, of course, far from universally positive) as a philosopher and aesthician (see, for instance, his biographical sketch in the *Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought*, which introduces him as a “German philosopher and musicologist” (Outhwaite and Bottomore 1993:727). Indeed, even sociologists who read and use Adorno do so mainly by reference to his aesthetic criticism. This is, in part, because some important sociological work (e.g., Adorno 1970) remains unavailable in English.

A cursory glance at his legacy in published sociology today attests to this. A brief empirical analysis of his works and how they have been presented to scholars can illustrate this reception. Table 1 summarizes the number of citations of a selection of his works, as measured by the Social Science Citation Index.

We present these figures with caution as, in one sense, they commit the error against which Adorno warns in *Meinungsforschung*: aggregating numerous atomistic data and interpreting them as a coherent whole. However, we are convinced that

Table 1. Citations of a Selection of Adorno's

Sociological Writings	Number of Citations	Music Writings	Number of Citations	Other Writings	Number of Citations
<i>Soziologische Schriften</i>	161	Introduction to Sociology of Music	240	Dialectic of Enlightenment	866
Positivistic Dispute	322	<i>Dissonanzen</i>	94	Minima Moralia	648
Prisms	528	Composing for the Films	46	Aesthetic Theory	1,114
Critical Models	172			Negative Dialectics	953
<i>Kritik</i>	20			Authoritarian Personality	4,072
<i>Ohne Leitbild</i>	77				
Total	1,273		380		7,653

Source: Social Science Citation Index (Institute for Scientific Information) June 2003.

*Meinungsforschung* makes a somewhat different point: an argument for acknowledging and interpreting observed information. In this work, Adorno provides the basis for a strong link between the critical stance for which he is well known and the everyday practice of sociological inquiry. In that vein, these data illustrate the contours of sociology's appropriation of Adorno.

The designation "Sociological Writings" is borrowed from the Suhrkamp Verlag, Adorno's German publisher, which has made all of Adorno's writings available (and reissued them in 2003 for what would have been his 100th birthday). These numbers reflect the number of times each work has been cited by other authors from 1980 to the present. While some of his "Sociological Writings" are well cited, they are not cited extensively, nor nearly as often as any of his other (nonsociological) works. Furthermore, one must approach both *The Positivist Dispute* and *Prisms* with some caution: One could argue that *Prisms* is not particularly sociological, and *The Positivist Dispute* is a collection of works of many writers, where Adorno figures prominently, but far from wholly.

Certainly, these figures are affected by the availability of these texts in other languages, notably, the availability of English language translations. For example, of the texts above, those that are available in both German and English are *Critical Models I and II*, *Prisms*, *Aesthetic Theory*, *Minima Moralia*, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, *The Positivist Dispute*, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, *The Authoritarian Personality*, *Composing for the Films*, and *Negative Dialectics*. Thus, a number of Adorno's sociological writings are not available to English-speaking audiences.

The name Theodor Adorno is immediately, and correctly, associated with the term and concept "Frankfurt School." However, in the two prominent histories of the Frankfurt School, Martin Jay's (1973) *The Dialectical Imagination* and Rolf Wiggerhaus' ([1986] 1994) *The Frankfurt School*, sociology is only a minor player in the intellectual milieu portrayed in the books. Jay's (1984) biography of Adorno discusses the sociology of Adorno, but more to demonstrate that, more often than not, sociology and sociological writing were one side of a greater dialectical analysis. In other words, "Adorno carried on his search for a changed concept of dialectic by criticizing sociology" (Rose 1978:77).

Even in collections of Adorno's and the Frankfurt School's writing, Adorno's sociological writings are not extensive. In *The Adorno Reader* (Adorno 2000a), only a small fraction of the text is dedicated to Adorno's sociological writings.

In *Meinungsforschung*, Adorno builds on prior discussions of empirical research (Adorno 1976a, 1976b) in which he charges the practice of positivist social science with a logical fallacy. By aggregating individually observed characteristics into social phenomena, Adorno argues, social science misunderstands both the category of the social—which deserves understanding as qualitatively different from the collection of individual parts—and the individual, who is erased from consideration through the process of aggregation.

The affinity between this article and Habermas's (1962b) work on the public sphere is unmistakable. Indeed, Adorno credits Habermas, who was Adorno's student at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, with much of the background for his thinking on publicness. If the conclusion of Adorno's work is less prescriptive than is that of Habermas, the difference reflects the two analysts' differing degrees of faith in the capacity of publicness to sustain itself in modern democracies.

We believe sociology's marginalization of Adorno is a mistake. Although much of Adorno's work is, indeed, aesthetic and philosophical in character, the claims Adorno makes in this work are directly relevant to sociology. This has become increasingly

clear with the recent translation and publication of Adorno's 1968 lecture series, *Introduction to Sociology* (Adorno 2000b). Adorno (2000b:7–8) insists there that sociology should be seen, historically and epistemologically, as a branch of philosophy, not as the atheoretically empirical, positivist practice it was then in the process of becoming.

In *Meinungsforschung*, Adorno makes a much more specific claim about the assumptions of public opinion research. He argues that public opinion research, as it is currently practiced, serves to undermine the very assumptions about the public on which that research rests. That claim is significantly more worrisome than the simpler charges that public opinion research is partial or that it ignores potentially important social processes. If Adorno's diagnosis is correct, the collection and analysis of public opinion deserves significant reexamination. This is not abstract philosophy; it is a specific theoretical and methodological critique of an ongoing sociological practice.

Beyond the realm of public opinion research, *Meinungsforschung's* critique of research strategy has important implications for current concerns with democratic deliberation and political participation. As Mendelberg (2002) has suggested, the literature on deliberation assumes the practicality and desirability of rational, civil forms of talk. It presumes, too, the existence of an independent public capable of engaging in such deliberation. Departing from his pioneering student (Habermas 1962a), Adorno suggests here that the normative and institutional bases of publicness undercut the development and sustenance of that public.

## OPINION RESEARCH AND PUBLICNESS

Public opinion research is generally pursued based on practical desires. For example, one wants to reliably predict the result of an election. The techniques employed were originally developed for market research. Unreflecting, practical sociology gets by with this. To be sure, limited to this, with which sociology has always concerned itself, it fancies this easy, superficial, and simple. Nevertheless, an element of necessity calls for the development of a new discipline, which would gladly encompass the whole of social scientific knowledge.

The German term “opinion research” (*Meinungsforschung*) drops, for the sake of brevity, a key adjective, which alone identifies its concern: research on *public* opinion. That adjective refers to the idea of the public. Looking at its history determines how public opinion research came to this. Publicness, the increasing scrutability of actions within their social surroundings, reaches back immeasurably far in history. The *concept* of publicness itself<sup>2</sup> was first conceived with the beginning of the bourgeois era, sometime in the seventeenth century. Since then, the Public-being (*Öffentlichsein*) of all possible ways of thinking, ways of conduct, and actions has been conscious of itself as an idea and has been threatened. Publicness is a bourgeois category, as Habermas (1962a) succinctly formulated it in his groundbreaking book about its structural changes, to which I am very indebted. He emphasizes that John Locke, one of the first important political philosophers of bourgeois democratic society, describes, “besides the divine and the national law, the ‘law of opinion’ as a category of the same rank,” as a law through which virtue and vice, in general, are first identified. The vagueness, however, with which, certainly in Locke, the ideas of

<sup>2</sup>Adorno differentiates here between the *practice* of publicness (the increasing scrutability of actions) and the normative *concept* of publicness, which he takes to be the new development. The distinction becomes important later in the article.

“public” and “public opinion” are tainted cannot be corrected through precise verbal definition. Publicness is not clearly demarcated; it is essentially polemical: what was once not public *should* become so. Only in this sense is the point to understand, as a criticism of absolute cabinet politics,<sup>3</sup> how the inverted aristocratic orders allow—and contemporary elite theories even celebrate—the secret.

Publicness could never, and it cannot now, be regarded as given. It is a product of the political conception of democracy that assumes citizens who are responsible and well informed about their fundamental interests. Publicness and democracy are thoroughly tied up in one another. Only under the guarantee of democratic rights to change opinions freely can publicness develop; only if the things citizens have a voice on are *public*, is democracy thinkable. Publicness is, though, endangered in its actual development by the social form of bourgeois society, through the commercial concerns that seek their own profits from the information that represents the people. Through this, right from the beginning, a moment of the restricted, the particular, is added in practice to the theoretically universal idea of the public. It yields generally to the material interests of institutions that prey on it. That clarifies the known difficulties with defining the concept of publicness. A societal (sub)sector monopolizes the information and colors it according to its interests. The idea of publicness yields the popular voice to those institutions. It stems from the fact that the normal conception of public opinion is that which is in the newspapers; that faced with all the resistance of the so-called public opinion against this or that political or social fact after its echo in the media becomes more valued, they therefore want less to *reflect* what the public thinks than to *control* it. Also, the hypostatization and oppositionization of all categories in bourgeois society also underlie public opinion and publicness. They split themselves off from the living subjects who constitute the substance of the idea of publicness. That distorts what civil history regarded throughout as progressive and democratic. Publicness became whatever it wanted to be and should want to be, the public consciousness of the masses, therefore inexact and ever less the democratic political development of the will, itself constrained in the face of the old circle of the so-called notable and cultivated. The people turned into an appendage of the machinery of public opinion from its fundamentally passively imagined audience, to which was conveyed the (objectively most important, political) news, not so differently from the audience of the theater, which demands that something be offered to it. In that way, today’s tabloids and magazines and their gossip stories about the high, indifferent private lives of movie stars and potentates are the consequences of the development of bourgeois publicness. Cushioned with private interests, publicness has always been accompanied by self-contradictory elements of the private. Publicness today serves those whom it does not concern at all and withholds from them, or aims ideologically, at those whom it actually does concern. Habermas summarized this development as the disintegration of publicness. Perhaps publicness was generally never realized in reality. At the beginning, because publicness was unavailable, it would have had to be created, as it prevented in the growing masses the very maturation it requires. Men’s right to publicness turned into their allotted supply of publicness; while they should be its subjects, they turned into its objects. Their autonomy, which required public information as a medium, is hindered by publicness. Those who do not allow themselves to escape from ideal economic exactitude to basic human intelligence will not allow themselves to express that the content that floods

<sup>3</sup>Adorno refers here to the practice of governing “behind closed doors” by national and international leadership without regard for the involvement of the public.



the organs of public opinion, exactly in reference to the masses, could hardly cause anything other than stultification. But publicness does not lay its degradation on men; men stay prisoners of appearances into which publicness' social function can only be denigrated under the ruling conditions. The irreconciliation of general interests and private interests also reveals itself in the opposition between the public and the private. Institutionalized public opinion falsely negates it: The private turns into public, the public private. The problem of publicness is not its excess, but its scarcity; if it were fully developed, it would not be through that which gets said, distracted by fundamentals, nor through that which is *not* said, so it would arrive at its correct place.

Such problems of public opinion identify the status of public opinion research. On the one side, fake public opinion through the organs of production, which have an interest in controlling if and to what extent they and the people are actually chosen or adopted by their broadcasters' opinions; if the masses' opposition and independence move against the monopoly [*Oktroi*]. Consolidation and rationalization of the large economic and administrative units lies in the plan of its success, the anticipated scientific control of the market. The growth of market research corresponds to this tendency; it is applied market research, transmitting those dead-end ways to communicating spiritual objects. The idea, introduced by P. F. Lazarsfeld, of administrative social research, empirical social research for purposes of administration, describes the reality correctly, appropriately; incidentally, market research is only one root of opinion research; the other is the social survey, whose history in Germany is bound also with the name of Max Weber. The current identity of market and opinion research in America, which are also bound together terminologically in Germany, is, throughout, in the sense of the observation of common sense, that in no way does such a radical difference prevail between the preferences for the names of a political candidate and for those of a brand name, as would be expected according to the theoretical differentiation between the autonomous and mature/responsible folk and the surroundings (environment) of the servitude (service-corp) of mass products. Under this aspect, opinion research would not be a mere *technique*, but just as much an *object* of sociology as a science that inquires into the objective structural laws of society.

But its meaning must not exhaust itself. It steps exactly into the space that was formed by the transition of the idea of public opinion to those of production and control: It could, following its potential, show how much it manipulates the opinions of the population, to what extent actual public opinion is a reflex of usurpation. The potential for improvement springs from the limits of manipulation. To choose only the most drastic example that submits the assumption of every non-naïve survey to political sociology: The results are demonstrated only if the populations actually determine the information, on which their sensible political decisions depend from the very beginning. Where that is not the case, opinion research, without social-critical intentions, spontaneously turns into social criticism. It can determine the reasons for insufficient trust in information, through analysis of information sources and of that which they supply the population, just as of the position of consciousness of those questioned, who are modeled for their part again through the whole social conditions, especially such as the consciousness industry, under which they live. Sensible research on public opinion, as they say in America, "on the other side of the fence," namely by the masses themselves, is able to do that further, if the so-called organs of public opinion really represent these, and if these opinions are spontaneous and sensible or, alternatively, if they fall into line with societal compulsion mechanisms. Research on public opinion could restore something of that, which the replacement of these opinions committed by market organs, because the idea of publicness in political

life became real. To be sure, that incorporates the demand that opinion research does not hypostatize itself, that it does not confuse the data it gathers with the final immediate truth, but remains conscious of its own state of mediation through the societal structure and through the institutions of opinion formation, which try to grab more and more power. Opinion research can fulfill its promise only if it applies its results and undertakes question formulations that hold to the objective social facts. Once objective societal institutions, like the press, tore the democratic law of public opinion, public opinion has also been centralized and through that moved in opposition to the idea of living subjects, whose diverse opinion it should record, so opinion research is caught up in the attempt, equally abstract, isolated, to isolate the naked subjective moment of opinion, the meaning of individual persons, and to confuse that, which is the naked reflex of objective, societal legalities, with the basis of social reality. Because opinion research turns into ideology, understandable through the claim that organs of public opinion as mass media would have conformed to the opinions of the populations, which, on its part, returns to the manipulation of public opinion. Opinion research easily assists the manipulation of consciousness at the expense of objective reality. But it shows through this to the same dialectic as the sphere of the political, to which the idea of opinion was indigenous and to which it still adds. It is an ideology that, once it achieves critical competence, will be able to dissect ideology and to change its conclusions of existence.

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