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Shaping the Public Mind

Shapers and movers

Who are ‘the American people’? What is ‘the British public’? The ‘public’ today is, throughout the world, a complex and changing phenomenon. This is a challenge for marketers, who need to know how to address the consuming public. And it is a problem for politicians, most of whom are looking for the most effective and inclusive ways of speaking to their electorates. What is at stake here, in the politicians’ search for that elusive connection with citizens, is not primarily the electoral success of this or that party or leader, but the success and contentment of our societies. The most serious threats today to the developed democracies come from within our societies. Notwithstanding the reality of some external threats, we must be most concerned about the new social divides which have opened up in our ‘postmodern’ social landscapes with their greater ethnic and cultural diversity, their internationalised post-industrial economies, their inequalities and their moral flux. In particular, since 9/11 and the terrorist attacks on Madrid and London, many Western countries have faced increasingly acute threats to social cohesion, centring around the apparent rejection of liberal democracy by some Islamist groups and the concomitant fear that Muslims face alienation and hostility from the rest of their national home publics. Managing such tensions and averting serious conflict has become a key task of government, a major part of which is concerned with the emotions triggered or generated by the insecurities and – at least for some – the disappointments of modern life.

‘Emotional governance’ means a deliberate and sophisticated attention to the emotional dynamics of the public, as part of the work of
government as well as of corporations and non-governmental social authorities. If effectively pursued, it will enhance the prospects for national leaders to speak authentically and inclusively to their publics, and thereby increase their capacity to shape patterns of public feeling. The fears of social engineering or even of totalitarian government which the phrase ‘emotional governance’ may evoke for some readers will be addressed in various parts of the book. It will be argued that contrary to these fears, the development of proactive emotional governance could be a crucial contribution to the maintenance and enhancement of robust and secure democracies, through the optimal management of the powerful and sometimes destructive emotions which are always at work in any social collective.

What futures can be imagined for the publics to which we all belong? And in particular, what is the future for the political public, for the public as citizens? Can we shape the public of the United States, or of the United Kingdom, or of anywhere, in such a way as to strengthen democracy and deepen social cohesion? This book is a small contribution to the large work of finding positive answers to this question.

It may be objected that the phrase ‘shaping the public’ is a curious, even a dangerous, one. One might think that a ‘public’ is not a plastic entity, a thing to be shaped. It is just there, changing all the time but under the influence of deep historical forces – changes in the economy and in culture, developments in technology, and so on – which while not quite beyond all control are certainly beyond any deliberate design. But that is too accepting of the superficial appearance of the public as an objective reality. On further reflection it is clear that any public is, in part at least, produced by those who study it. This is most simply and obviously the case in relation to opinion polls. These tell us what our fellow citizens think in aggregate, which otherwise we would not know with such breadth and clarity, if at all. This knowledge then influences what we individually think, or are prepared to report that we think. This is a major example of reflexivity, of the ways in which monitoring, surveillance, information flows and feedback circuits of various sorts are intrinsic to the functioning of modern society.

Publics are also shaped by those who seek to address them, including – crucially – politicians. Communications professionals of various sorts also have substantial formative influence on the public’s definition of itself. Journalists and marketing communicators are foremost in wielding this influence, and it will be an argument of this book that the communications professions do not always recognise in full the heavy responsibility they carry for the kind of public which we are or might become.