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THE OTHER
HEADING

REFLECTIONS
ON TODAY'S
EUROPE

TRANSLATED BY PASCALE-ANNE BRAULT
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INTRODUCTION BY MICHAEL B. NAAS

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CALL IT A DAY FOR DEMOCRACY

Today, what is public opinion?

—Today? The silhouette of a phantom, the haunting fear of democratic consciousness. The phantom has rights and powers, but how does one put a stop to contradictory demands? Why must parliamentary democracy protect itself from what in fact resembles the source of its legitimacy? Yes, you are right to specify: today, in the light of today, in today's day, and age [au jour d'aujourd'hui]. Concerning the rhythm, the medium, and first of all the history of public opinion, it has to do with the question of the day [jour].

1. Opinion lends to "public opinions" the vice or virtue of the unforeseeable: "mobile and changing," "difficult to govern," the Letter to M. d'Alembert already said. Like "dice," they defy both "force and reason."* De facto and de jure, opinion can change from one day to the next [de jour en jour]. Literally ephemeral,** it has no status because it does not have to be stable, not even constantly unstable, for it sometimes "takes its time." A first ambiguity stems from this rhythm:* if it had a proper place (but that is the whole question), public opinion would be the forum for a permanent and transparent discussion. It would be opposed to non-democratic powers, but also to its own political representation. Such repre-

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**from the Greek ephemerous, "lasting only one day."—Trans.

This is the complete version of an interview (with Olivier Salvatori and Nicolas Weill) that was published in an abbreviated form in Le Monde de la Révolution française, no. 1 (monthly, January 1989).
sentation will never be adequate to it, for it breathes, deliberates and decides according to other rhythms. One can also fear the tyranny of shifts in opinion. The speed, the "from day to day" [au jour le jour], even in the "long run," sometimes affects the rigor of the discussion, the time of the "coming to awareness," with opinion sometimes lagging paradoxically behind the representative agencies. Thus on the subject of capital punishment, we believe that we know (but especially by way of opinion polls!) that the majorities would not be the same today (1) in the Parliament, (2) during a referendum, (3) in "opinion polls" or sociological studies.

There is no shortage of examples of such discordances or differences in rhythm. In order to gain recognition for the immigrants' right to vote in local elections, the campaign launched by SOS Racism* would have to inform and convince an opinion that would then be heard by the parliamentary majority; but the President of the Republic, then a candidate, had already announced his personal "opinion" on the subject and, even better, had given his point of view on the present state of affairs, that is, on the lagging behind of public opinion and even of the Parliament—something that is not without effect on either of them. A disconcerting typology. How does one here identify public opinion? Does it take place? Where is it given to be seen, and as such? The wandering of its proper body is also the ubiquity of a specter. It is not present as such in any of these spaces. Exceeding electoral representation, public opinion is de jure neither the general will nor the nation, neither ideology nor the sum total of private opinions analyzed through sociological techniques or modern poll-taking institutions. It does not speak in the first person, it is neither subject nor object ("we," "one"); one cites it, one makes it speak, ventriloquizes it ("the real country" [pays réel], "the silent majority," Nixon's "moral majority," Bush's "mainstream," etc.), but this "average" [moyenne] sometimes retains the

*An organization devoted to fighting racism in France.—Trans.
power to resist the means [moyens] "proper to guiding public opinion," to resist this "art of changing" public opinion that, as Rousseau again says, "neither reason, nor virtue, nor laws" have.

2. Now, this god of a negative politology can give no sign of life, in broad daylight, without a certain medium. The daily rhythm essential to it presupposes the widespread distribution of something like a newspaper, a daily. This techno-economic power allows Opinion to be constituted and recognized as public opinion. Although these categories today appear hardly adequate, the newspaper is supposed to secure a place [lieu] of public visibility proper to informing, forming, reflecting, or expressing, thus to representing, an opinion that would there find the milieu of its freedom. This correlation between the daily or quotidian—be it written or audiovisual—and the history of public opinion largely exceeds what is called the "opinion press." Valuable and dangerous, more and more "refined," opinion polls adjust themselves at a rhythm that will never be that of political or labor union representation. For they see the light of day in a press that often retains the initiative and power. Finally, we now know, and the newspaper or daily produces the newness of this news as much as it reports it, that public opinion is no longer in our day what it was yesterday and from the beginnings of its history.

3. For the phenomenon was never natural, that is to say, universal. No more in fact than everydayness as a major category of the social rhythm ever was. Before asking about the supposed "reality" of public opinion today, as well as about the cinematography of its silhouette, it is necessary to recall that the phantom has a story, a history: it is European, recent, and heavily scanned. The discourse on opinion is certainly as old as the world: doxa or "opinion" (which is not exactly the same thing) no doubt has equivalents in non-Western cultures. But as for the history of public opinion, it seems to be linked to the political discourse of Europe. It is a modern artifact (the premises of the American and French Revolutions here provide the most
visible landmark), even if a "high point" was prepared by the tradition of a political philosophy. Under this or any other name, I do not believe that anyone has spoken seriously of public opinion without the model of parliamentary democracy and as long as an apparatus of laws (in France, from article XI of the Declaration of Human Rights* to the law of 1881 concerning the freedom of the press) did not permit or promise the formation, expression, and especially the "publication" of this opinion outside of these political or corporate representations.

If it is not electoral in the moment proper to it, opinion, as its name indicates, is called upon to pronounce itself by means of a judgment. This judgment is not some knowledge, but an engaged evaluation, a voluntary act. It always takes the form of a "judgment" (yes or no) that must exercise a power of control.

*Article XI of the Déclaration des droits de l'homme states: "The unrestrained communication of thoughts and opinions being one of the most precious rights of man, every citizen may speak, write, and publish freely, provided he is responsible for the abuse of this liberty in cases determined by the law."—Trans.
ated today in an accelerated way, thereby posing serious questions about the present functioning, if not the very principles, of liberal democracy. Just recall the demonstrations in favor of “private education,” the “coordinations” of students or nurses, the debates surrounding RU 486, AIDS, drug addiction, or condoms, even the Scorsese film* (I am speaking here about speeches, declarations, or demonstrations—these elements of opinion—and not about the bombs intended to put an end to all that). But everything that is not of the order of judgment, decision, and especially representation escapes both present-day democratic institutions and public opinion as such. This couple is joined, conjugated, by the possibility of evaluation in the form of the judgment that decides (yes or no) and that is produced in a representation. Opinion surveys try to escape this law, on the one hand, by exceeding electoral themes and immediately political decisions and, on the other, by multiplying the evaluations in percentages (more or less) rather than in an alternative (yes or no). But a discourse concerns public opinion as such only if it anticipates a legislative debate and if the “more or less” announces a “yes or no.” What then becomes of this reserve of experience, evaluation, and even determination (the “trends,” “tastes,” and “customs”) that is not of the order of judgment (yes or no) and representation, in any sense of this word? It is here that one can question the authority of opinion—not in its content but in its form of pre-electoral judgment; and one can even question the distinction private/public whose rigor will always be threatened by language, by language alone, and thus already with the slightest mark. What public—and thus political—place is to be made for this kind of question?

A “government of opinion” can play with opinion, invent it or invoke it against instituted representations. But this can be done,

* Derrida is referring to The Last Temptation of Christ, which was picketed throughout France and even provoked a bomb attack on a movie theatre in the Latin Quarter of Paris. RU 486 is what is known in the U.S. as the French abortion pill.—Trans.
or said, only in an at least formal democracy. A popular dictatorship or a totalitarian regime is not a government of opinion (and what is seeing the light of day today in the U.S.S.R. is perhaps quite simply a public opinion). The new means of “staying up to date,” of taking the pulse of opinion at a quasi-daily rhythm, authorizes and requires a certain power (for example that of a head of state or even of a democratic government) to take into account an evolution before and beyond its expression in the Parliament, in the parties and labor unions, to discern changes in the majority before elections and even before a referendum. It is not that opinion is the amorphous reservoir of an untamed spontaneity that would exceed organizations (parties, labor unions, etc.). Neither passive nor active, the recent “coordinations” of students or nurses were no more “manipulated” than they were the result of an unorganized spontaneity. Other categories are thus necessary to conduct the analysis—and political action—beyond this basic alternative. The same thing goes for the relationships with institutions and especially with the press: public opinion does not express itself, if one understands by this that it exists somewhere deep down, before manifesting itself in broad daylight, as such, in its phenomenality. It is phenomenal. It is no more produced or formed, indeed influenced or inflected, than simply reflected or represented by the press. These naive or crude interpretations are rooted in a powerful philosophical discourse. Is not acting responsibly first of all to try and reconsider these interpretations? Such a task is philosophical and political, theoretical and practical; it is difficult but also dangerous, because it risks touching upon the very concept of representation, upon the “idea of representatives” that Rousseau called “modern.”* But does not a democrat have the responsibility to think through the axioms or foundations of democracy? To analyze unrelentingly its historical determinations—those that, in

1989, can be delimited and those that cannot?

For it is indeed a question of the future of democracy. The dimension of "public" space no doubt reaches its philosophical modernity with the Enlightenment, with the French and American Revolutions, or with discourses like Kant's that link the Aufklärung—the progress of Enlightenment and of the day—to the freedom of making public use of reason in all domains (even though reason is not reducible to the "opinion" that it must also submit to critique). In this post-Revolutionary modernity, the techno-economic mutation of the media marks another scansion. Following World War I, and especially in Germany, the crises that radio could provoke in the traditional space of a parliamentary democracy gave rise to heated debates. (Cf. Ferdinand Tönnies’s *La critique de l'opinion publique* [Kritik der öffentlichen Meinung] [Berlin: J. Springer] of 1922, or the works of Carl Schmitt, whose influence is still alive, whether he is cited or not, (on the) left and (on the) right, in every analysis of public space, for example in Habermas.* These questions cannot be taken up here—let us not forget the constraints of the press, which are not only quantitative: they also impose models of readability. All the stakes that we are discussing at this very moment are concentrated in what I must entrust here to the ellipsis of a telegram. Can one speak seriously of the press in the press? Yes and no, in contraband.) These debates have not become outdated: think of the immediately international effects of the television of tomorrow on a public opinion that was first considered to be national. Think of the transformations that an opinion poll technique introduces when it can literally accompany and, even better, produce the televisual event ("The Hour of Truth"!).** Like the press, this technique can surely give a voice to minorities deprived of institutional representation; it can correct errors and injustices; but this “de-
mocratization" never legitimately represents. It never represents without filtering or screening—let us repeat it—a "public opinion." The "freedom of the press" is democracy's most precious good, but to the degree that one has not at least granted rights, effectively, in laws and in customs, to the questions that we have just been asking, this fundamental "freedom" remains to be invented. Every day. At least. And democracy along with it.

—What system is to be invented, then, so that the formally free press does not function as censorship?

—It is in fact in the chapter "Of Censorship" that the Social Contract treats this "kind of law" that the "judgment" of public opinion is. But can we here trust in the opposition form/content? Is it enough to give content to a form in order to advance the freedom of the press, that is, the freedom of a right that will never go without duty or without the recognition of a freedom "before the press"? It is necessary to maintain formal rigor, for without it no right is protected; and so it is necessary to invent more refined procedures, a more differentiated legislation, one better fitted to the techno-economic mutations of the "free market." An infinite task, not only because there will always be something more or something better to be done, but because of a principal contradiction. A democracy must surely be vigilant so that censorship (in the legal sense: this "criticism" that has, Kant says, public "power") does not win back lost ground.* It is also necessary to fight against the effects of "censorship" in the large sense, against a "new censorship," if I may put it this way, that threatens liberal societies; to fight against accumulation, concentration, and monopoly; in short, against all quantitative phenomena that might marginalize or reduce to silence anything that cannot be measured on their scale. But one cannot, for all that, plead simply for plurality, dispersion.

or fractioning, for the mobility of screening places or of the subjects who occupy them. For certain socio-economic forces might once again take advantage of these marginalizations and this absence of a general forum. How then to open the avenue of great debates, accessible to the majority, while yet enriching the multiplicity and quality of public discourses, of agencies of evaluation, of "scenes" or places of visibility, etc.? A wager, an aporia? This invention, at once impossible and necessary, can only be announced on the basis of another imperative: the unity or “centrality” of the democratic forum must not be confused with that of the mass, with concentration, homogeneity, or monopoly. For the “new censorship”—and this is the strength of its ruse—combines concentration and fractionalization, accumulation and privatization. It de-politicizes. This terrible logic is not restricted to the “audiovisual,” though it is more perceptible there. It is at work as soon as an interpretation, that is to say, a selective evaluation, informs a “fact.” No information escapes it.

This is all too evident in what is called the “cultural” press (arts, literature, philosophy, etc.) and in all those “refined,” overdetermined, super-coded evaluations that do not immediately induce public opinion as political judgment or electoral decision. Each time a media institution controls market phenomena on a massive scale, it seizes and censures just as massively; it dogmatizes, no matter what its real eclecticism or facade of liberalism, its virtues or vices, may be, no matter whether it captivates or bores, whether one finds it distinguished or crude or both. When a single judge, no matter what one may think of his or her particular talents, is entrusted somewhere with a monopoly of evaluation, of screening, of exhibiting in full daylight, he or she determines sales in the supermarkets of culture. A work is thus relegated far from the court, into the darkness of a quasi-private enclosure, if it does not fulfill the conditions of visibility in this great little mirror that fascinates as it distorts, that screens and deflects toward itself so much energy, that interrupts the conversation, makes the body and the so-
cial gaze conform to a new physiology, and then finally projects abroad the latest icons of the national culture. Today, on this scale, a book must sell and—there is a difference—be read at more than ten thousand copies in order to be something more than a confidential and quasi-private correspondence. The result is that what is called “difficult” research, that which resists the stereotypes of the image or of narration, which does not submit to the norms of the culture—thereby represented in its “average” (in the singular, “opinion” always means the “average”)—is excluded from the scene: occulted, deprived of the light of day. As a result, such research is judged to be more and more “obscure,” “difficult,” indeed “unreadable,” and so it becomes what one says it is and wants it to be: inaccessible. And the cycle accelerates. Whatever may be said of the quality of our “cultural” media, is it a coincidence that our country is, in Europe, the one in which people read the least? That our libraries are in a disastrous state, almost too shameful to admit? And that—a problem inextricably linked to these—our schools and universities, the privileged places for the “formation of judgment,” are undergoing such hardships?

But once again, let us not simplify things. Perhaps it is also necessary to take account of other rhythms and trajectories. Perhaps it is necessary not to let oneself be fascinated by quantitative immediacy. Like the schools, the press contributes to the quality of democratization. Access to the average is often a form of progress. Certain newspapers can, depending on the situation, accentuate or denounce, for better or for worse, official evaluations (those, for example, of the academic profession, of certain academic bodies). But is the power of the media unlimited? It too is evaluated from one day to the next by a public that is not always silent. This heterogeneous power can sometimes criticize itself, from one part of its large body to another. Is it not in the end judged over a longer period of time and according to criteria that remain necessarily indecipherable to it? If it contributes to mass successes that are forgotten a
month later, does not it too risk being forgotten? Untimely developments that escape its grid of readability might one day take over without any resistance at all. As for the future course of a work, the quality of ten readers, as we know, sometimes plays a more determining role than the immediate reality of ten thousand buyers. What would our great media machines do with Rimbaud or Lautréamont, with Nietzsche or Proust, with a Kafka or a Joyce of 1989? They were at first saved by a handful of readers (a minimal listening audience), but what readers! Perhaps this analogy already suffers from anachronism—alas—for the intrinsic history of those episodes was no doubt linked to its outside and, whether one denies it or not, to a structure of "public space" that is now outdated. But the limited edition still retains a chance: quasi-private, it nonetheless has access to public space. Between the two, samizdat.* Given these rhythms and qualitative differences, the porosity of a border between "private" and "public" seems more incalculable than ever. Each event comes into contact with the law, like contraband smugglers or members of the resistance. Passage is never assured. Public opinion is not an incalculable average, but there is perhaps the incalculable in it. It is simply that the incalculable, if there is any, never presents itself; it is not, it is never, the theme of some scientific or philosophical objectification.

The only choice is thus not concentration or dispersion. The alternative would rather be between the unilateral and the multilateral in the relations of the media to the "public," to the "publics." Responsibility, that is, the freedom of the press and before the press, will always depend upon the effectiveness of a "right of response,"* a right that allows the citizen to be more than the fraction (the pri-

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*Russian for self-edition: A general term for a group of means to distribute works prohibited by censorship.—Trans.

*Though le droit de réponse is usually known in English as the "right of reply," we have opted for the "right of response" since it maintains the relationship with responsibility. Droit de réponse was also the name of a controversial though popular French TV talk show.—Trans.
vate, deprived [privée] fraction, in sum, and more and more so) of a passive, consumer “public,” necessarily cheated because of this.

Is there democracy without reciprocity?

—How does one extend the right of response to such a degree?

—France is one of the few countries that recognize the right of rectification (on the part of public powers to which it is reserved) and, more generally, the right of response. This is a fundamental right. Yet one can only exercise it (going strictly by the law—I am not speaking about ethics or politics) in very restricted conditions. Error or falsification, omission, interpretative violence, abusive simplification, the rhetoric of insinuation, stupidity as well, all these things most often remain without any public and immediate response, on the radio, on television, or in the newspapers. And of course, massively, in books. Even when the juridical or technical difficulties do not discourage one in advance, a response is in general neutralized by the place, framework, and delays. As long as the right of response does not receive its full extension and effectiveness (again the infinite task), democracy will be accordingly limited. Only in the press? Certainly, but the press is everywhere today: it gives (itself), in any case, (out to be) the day itself, it brings (itself) to the light of day [(se) donner . . . (pour) le jour]. It brings public space to the light of day, gives the light of day to it, to its publicity. It brings to light the day itself, gives daylight to the day itself. Thus the right of response hardly exists. Why does one so often pretend (a fiction of democracy) to ignore the violence of this dissymmetry, along with what can or cannot be reduced in it? Why the hypocrisy, the denial or the blindness before the all-too-evident? Why is this “all-too-evident” at once as clear as the light of day and the most nocturnal face of democracies as they are, presently?

Given that good will (which is indispensable) will not be enough to change things that no longer fall under a logic of simple “consciousness” and of a juridical—that is, inadequate—concept of responsibility, given
that technical procedures and formal legality (which are indispensable and can always be improved) will never reach the end of this immeasurability, given that whenever it is a question of response and responsibility, of address and destination, etc., the philosophical concepts that we have inherited have never sufficed; given all this, one will recall the French Revolution only by appealing to other revolutions. The memory of a promise, such an appeal or call seeks a new tone. It, no doubt, will no longer be "revolutionary," and it must take its time—beyond the "revolutionary day" [journée révolutionnaire]. Nothing guarantees it this, and I can say no more about it in a page.**

"Yet another effort."***

*During the French Revolution, "revolutionary days" were called to mark, celebrate, and renew the Revolution.—Trans.

**Derrida is referring to his agreement with the editors of *Le Monde de la Révolution française* that his article not exceed a single newspaper page.—Trans.


And yet another word, if you will allow me, the very word that you gave me to begin with—*today*. Already the days are numbered: *at another speed*, the day is announced, the day is coming, when the day reaches its end. The day is announced when the day (the visibility of the image and the publicity of the public, but also the unity of daily rhythm, but also the phenomenality of the political, but also perhaps, and at the same time, its very essence) will no longer be the *ratio essendi*, the reason or the ration of the telemetatheoretical effects that we have just been speaking about.

Has the day ever been the measure of all things, as one pretends to believe?

In its first edition, this opinion, I hardly dare say this fiction, remains the most widely shared thing in the world.