

How does ‘Climate of Opinion’ Guide our Thinking?

The idea of ‘climates of opinion’ is useful for a number of purposes, including thinking about Mr. Trump’s presidency.

The implications for us arise from the question the idea suggests:

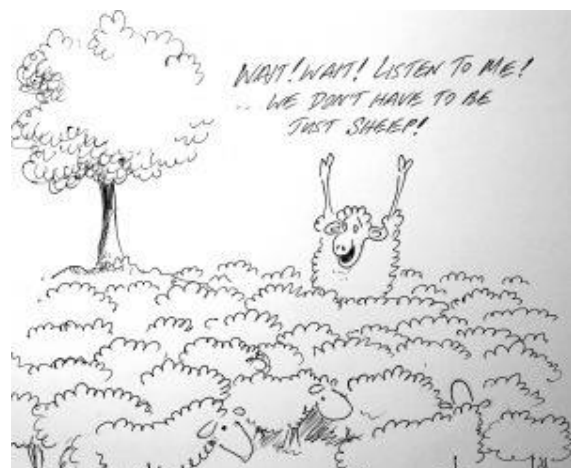
How do we know, and become aware of, our ‘climate of opinion’, the preconceptions which guide our thinking?

What are the implications for ourselves of our ‘climate of opinion’?

What is our response as we become aware of our ‘climate of opinion’?

The ‘climate of opinion’ refers to “those instinctively held preconceptions in the broad sense ... which [impose] ... *a peculiar use of intelligence and a special type of logic*” on an era (Becker: 5; emphasis added).

Whitehead, who revived the seventeenth-century phrase in his study of how a ‘new mentality’ emerged from the rise of ‘modern science’ since the C12th, says that “[g]eneral climates of opinion persist for periods of about two to three generations, that is to say, for periods of sixty to a hundred year” and suggests that “shorter waves of thought...play on the surface of the tidal movement” (Whitehead: 29).



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A sense of 'climate of opinion' is conveyed by the contrast between the so-called 'Age of Faith' (C13th) and 'Age of Reason' (C18th). In the latter period 'reason', a word with many meanings, became associated with a 'rational' rejection of the faith which all were duty-bound to believe and, therefore, which dominated the earlier period.

The revealed knowledge and **unquestioned fact** of the Age of Faith was, briefly, that all was created by an omniscient God in six days, man was made perfect but fell from grace, salvation was possible through the sacrifice of God's son, life in the Earthly City was a temporary probation by which the faithful could gain entrance to the Heavenly City, the end of life on earth which come in God's time, and only God could understand all.

The contrast between these ages does not arise because of bad logic or poor intelligence in the C13th: St Thomas Aquinas was a person of powerful intellect and logical thought as much as any of the 'rationalists', like Voltaire, who later on came to find his ideas meaningless or flawed.

The function of intelligence, a creation by God, and logic in the medieval period was limited to demonstrating the truth of revealed knowledge by reconciling the '*facts of experience*' with the world known through the unquestioned faith in the Supreme Creator, the Almighty. In the later period the function of intelligence and logic became to attack, undermine or free people from the dogmas of faith and the implications following from it.

The difference between the two periods is not that the latter can be described as a period of 'reason' and the former as not so: "... [the unfortunate use of the word reason] obscures the fact that reason may be employed to support faith as well as destroy it" and they shared the "conviction that their beliefs could be reasonably demonstrated" (Becker: 6 – 8). The difference was not in the ability to think or reason. The difference arises from their different climates of opinion – from the different *preconceptions* of their ages.

Because the nature of the climate of opinion changes, the 'modern mind', i.e., *we in our climate of opinion*, is limited to describing earlier climates of opinion as best we can since *we cannot live in them* and, in Hannah Arendt's view, to 'training our imaginations to go visiting'.

A sense of the climate of opinion which prevailed in Germany in the 1930's is conveyed by the following scene in the film *Cabaret* (1972): click [here](#) to watch clip.

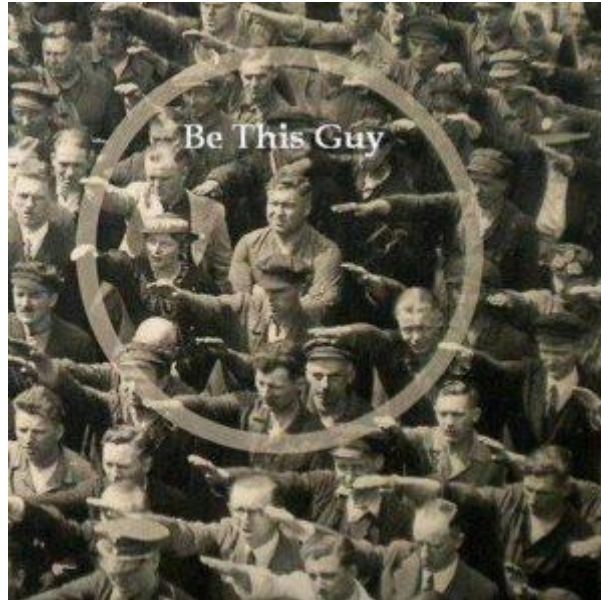
Another film which gives a sense of the nature and power of a climate of opinion is *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013). Based on a true story, it illustrates the climate of opinion which held that enslaving black people was right and God's work and defined the lives of many people, justified a 'business' and unified a large region of the United States of America.

PRACTICE

We can use the idea of a 'climate of opinion' to explore the following statement by Hannah Arendt and, by attending to ourselves as we do so, thereby to surface implications for ourselves.

*"When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by **what everybody else does and believes in**, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. In such emergencies, it turns out that the purging component of thinking... is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call with some reason the most political of man's mental abilities. It is **the faculty that judges particulars without subsuming them under general rules** which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules" (emphasis added).*

BE THIS PERSON?



References:

Carl Becker. *The Heavenly City of Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1932.

A. N. Whitehead. *Science and the Modern World*. Penguin Books, West Drayton, Middlesex, 1928.