

ESSAY 3 - SECOND IDEA

'Climate of Opinion'

The second essay in this series brought us to Hume's concept of 'opinion', his idea – his fundamental truth about politics - that **the foundation of all government is 'opinion'**, and his analysis of 'opinion' into three elements as the point for starting how we can think about the question of the 'collapse of democracy'.

Thus, using Hume's idea, we have 'opinion' as the 'driver' – the principle of change about government - about the 'general', *i.e.*, government as such, the 'particular', *i.e.*, the type of government, and, we may add, the 'specific', *i.e.*, the government of the day, the faction or party which is elected to power.

This give is the first idea for constructing a **Web of Ideas** with which to work.

Taking this idea, centred on the concept of 'opinion', as our point of departure, and keeping in mind the question about which we wish to have a way of thinking, we now look to what ideas we can embark with from this starting point.

Prelude

The first need we can sense is for an idea for getting some 'hold' - putting some 'shape' - on the nebulous matter of the 'opinion' of a people.

We can recall here the distinction at the end of the second essay between 'general ideas', such as about *government as such*, and 'particular ideas', such as *type of government*. We are taking the former for granted for our purposes here and not pursuing that issue. Nor are we concerned about the specific government of a party elected to power except in relation to positions about type of government.

Therefore, if we work on the understanding that there is general acceptance of the need or desirability for government as suchⁱ, we therefore are looking for an idea to connect 'type of government' to that *vague*, intangible sense of the 'opinion' of a people.

That is, we are seeking some way of linking how opinion held across people translates into effect on the type of government through supporting (often unstated and so implicit) positions about type of government and electing specific parties to power to act on their positions.

Orientation

When electing specific parties to power to implement their policies people are supporting, often unstated, positions or leanings toward type of government. Very often, the expressed positions of parties are silent about type of government and so it is, and generally may be, assumed that their (implicit) position is one of continuing things as they are, although, of course, there is no guarantee of this. Indeed, voters are entitled to consider this to be the position.

That is when times are 'normal'. There are times, however, when that is not the case and there is a shift either on foot of an announced change towards type of government or, as we have seen in recent years, the change is revealed only in time through actions.

We have seen this, for example, in the case of the United States since the election of the Trump presidency the executive power of the presidential office is being to move *in practice* towards an authoritarian, if not yet autocratic, type of government. This is being done without making any overt moves on the formal constitution for government of the United States.

We may also be seeing, in the Summer and Autumn of 2019, what appears to be a leaning, at least, towards 'amending' the (unwritten) constitution of the U.K. and to challenging the rule of law, which was previously sacrosanct in it from a long history, and towards autocratic monarchism. ⁱⁱ

Thus, when the need for government as such is granted, we need to be aware that type of government cannot be taken for granted and may be subject to *overt* and *covert* change in various ways, that is, the *status quo* as regards type of government may not hold.

Therefore, we need to get back to the 'opinion of a people'. At this point, however, there is need to take a moment to attend to a methodological matter in our search for the link we want.

We can obviously observe the expression of opinion by individual persons in the form of written and verbal statements, which includes their voting 'statements' for our purposes here. We see and hear such statements

around us all the time. We also see the outcomes of elections in the counting of votes cast.

What we don't see, however, is the *overall feeling* which has hold of a people about some matter, *e.g.*, the 'sense of opinion', as analysed by Hume, about government - governing the electoral actions of people.ⁱⁱⁱ

Like any aspect of thinking, this feeling is an invisible activity within us. What we can only observe is the outcome of the activity, *i.e.*, the 'thought-object' that we can see, such as the vote we cast, but not the activity itself within a person.

We *must use metaphorical expressions* to make visible something invisible and intangible such as feeling. We must use metaphor to translate an 'invisible' into a 'visible' when we need to convey it and be able to 'look at' it. Thus, we need an appropriate metaphor.

Idea and Concept for Thinking With

If we agree on this line of thinking and the need to use a metaphorical expression to advance out thinking, we could next turn to the **metaphor** of a '**climate of opinion**' to capture the shape of opinion of a people as the next step to forming the framework we are constructing for thinking about the problem of the 'crisis of democracy'.^{iv}

The **concept** of 'climate of opinion' was used by historian of ideas, Carl Becker (1873-1945), for referring 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. ^v The **idea** here is that the 'climate of opinion' influences and maybe governs what people do.



Carl Becker © Mike O'Donnell

The term 'climate of opinion' is commonly used without, however, paying much attention to what *it* is saying or how we are using it - more often than not it is used casually and unthinkingly as a cliché - a phrase just to sound good while only filling a space in conversation. We should pay attention to the 'space', to do some work in it. We can refresh the phrase with a little effort and, thereby make it into a useful idea for thinking with, including our thinking about our question about the 'crisis of democracy'.

Becker was reviving a seventeenth-century idea of a seventeenth-century writer to capture something long-term and general - the prevailing attitude

or influence - of people, just as we use the word 'climate' itself when talking about long-term weather conditions.

These "instinctively held preconceptions in the broad sense" are, we suggest, what Hume intends by 'opinion'. The metaphor of 'climate' makes visible the invisible 'preconceptions held instinctively' by a people - *generality of opinion* - so we can 'grasp' them for examination.^{vi}

The methodological issue Becker was using the concept of 'climate of opinion' to address was how to 'see' the prevailing attitude of an age or the generality of opinion and the technique he employed was the isolation of vocabularies of the epoch.

Becker used the notion of an age having 'magic words' and "grand magisterial words" - words that "have their entrances and their exits", that "unobtrusively come in and go out", "words that [w]e should scarcely be aware either of their approach or their departure, except for a slight feeling of discomfort, a shy self-consciousness in the use of them" - to 'see' and establish the 'atmosphere' he is talking about.

The subtlety of his method is well conveyed by the following:

"If we would discover the little backstairs door that for any age serves as the secret entranceway to knowledge, we will do well to look for certain unobtrusive words with uncertain meanings that are permitted to slip off the tongue or the pen without fear and without research; words which, having from constant repetition lost their metaphorical significance, are unconsciously mistaken for objective realities."

Becker then gave examples of four centuries:

"In the thirteenth century the key words would no doubt be God, sin, grace, salvation, heaven, and the like; in the nineteenth century, matter, fact, matter-of-fact, evolution, progress; in the twentieth century, relativity, process, adjustment, function, complex. In the eighteenth century [the century of interest to Becker] the words without which no enlightened person could reach a restful conclusion were nature, natural law, first cause, reason, sentiment, humanity, perfectibility (these last three being necessary for the more tender - minded, perhaps)."

As noted by Becker, the philosopher and mathematician Alfred Whitehead (1861- 1947), whose idea of 'process' has been influential throughout a

range of areas^{vii}, had revived this idea and phrase in his study of how the rise of mathematics in modern science in the seventeenth century shaped a 'new modern mentality' in Western culture, one that still influences us today.^{viii}



Alfred Whitehead © Mike O'Donnell

Whitehead 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 years"

and suggests that:

"shorter waves of thought...play on the surface of the tidal movement".^{ix}

At any given moment, as William James said, we hold a 'stock of opinions'. An opinion we have would come out of 'the climate of opinion' composed of the longer and shorter waves of thought.^x

In that regard, as the philosopher Garrett Barden pointed out, using the term 'tradition' for much the same role as Whitehead's use of 'climate of opinion', each of us is born into a tradition and this tradition of thought is our starting point:

"[o]ur tradition is where we are *fated to begin*. Where we end is our responsibility... we begin from our tradition since our tradition is not only where but, more profoundly, *what we are*." ^{xi}

Thinking in Examples

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*:

<https://youtu.be/TiyrtwVwkEE>

A deeper sense of 'climate of opinion' is conveyed by the contrast between the so-called 'Age of Faith' (13th Century) and 'Age of Reason' (18th century).

In the latter period 'reason', a word with many uses, became associated with a 'rational' rejection of the faith which all were duty-bound to believe and, therefore, which dominated the earlier period. The 'climate of opinion' - 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 obtain entrance to the 'Heavenly City' when the end of life on earth came 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 13th Century: St Thomas Aquinas was a person of powerful intellect and capable of logical thought as much as any of the 'rationalists' who later on came to find his ideas meaningless or flawed.

The function of intelligence, a creation by God, and logic in the medieval age 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 epochs is not that the latter can be described as a period of 'reason' and the former as not so:

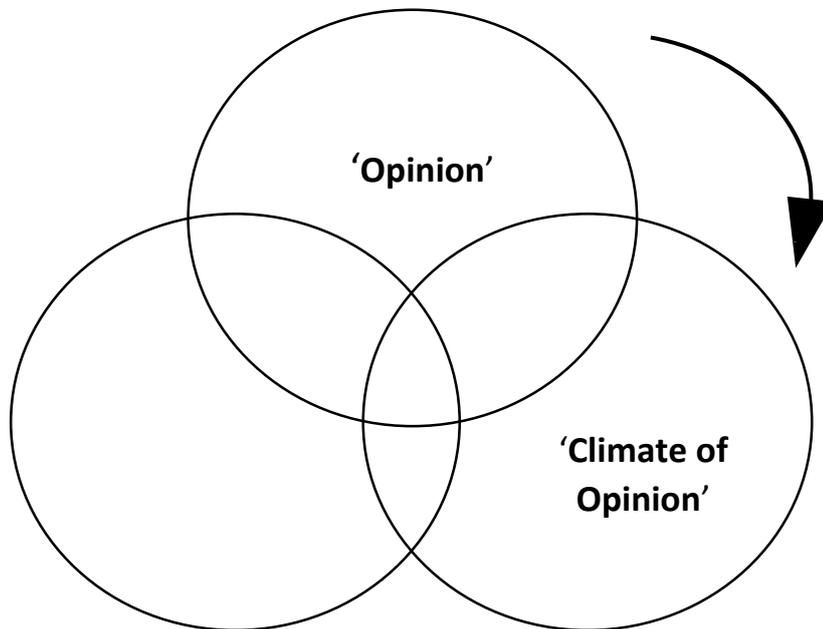
"... [the unfortunate use of the word reason] obscures the fact that reason may be employed to support faith as well as destroy it" and they shared the "conviction that their beliefs could be reasonably demonstrated".^{xii}

The difference arises from differences in their 'climates of opinion', that is, from the different *preconceptions* of their ages.

A contemporary example of using 'climate of opinion' to think about government is [this](#) article published in *The Guardian* about the current government in Britain.

Thus, to help us think in this way, we select the aspect of an age designated the 'climate of opinion' as the second idea for constructing a **Web of Ideas** for thinking about the issue at hand.

Web of Ideas (2)



Developmental Questions for Conversation and Reflection

Holding in mind the idea that the foundation of all government is opinion *together with* the idea of 'climate of opinion', we are prompted to ask questions, such as the following, and their further implications:

Do I think the 'crisis of democracy' today is based on a 'long-wave' or a 'short-wave' of opinion?

How would I describe the 'climate of opinion' – "the special type of logic" – of our age?

What forces do I see as shaping this 'climate of opinion'?

How do I think the return of 'strongman' government fits with the 'climate of opinion' today?

Have I considered how opinions in my general interactions with friends, media, colleagues, etc. influence how I think about government?

Do I think that these opinions impact me? What thoughts have I about how they do?

Whose opinions do I listen to repeatedly and whose opinions do I repeatedly dismiss?

Whose opinions, if any, 'drive me mad'? Have I ever thought about why this happens, *i.e.*, why *I* do that *to myself*?

ⁱ This is not an unquestionable matter and, even if there may be widespread agreement or acceptance of the need for government as such, it is not unanimous as evidenced by, for example, the extreme form of Libertarianism, as it is called, in the politics of the United States of America and some forms of Anarchism.

ⁱⁱ For example, around the time of writing (8 September 2019):

Heather Stewart and Severin Carrell, Brexit: Boris Johnson short of options as rebels vow to secure delay, *The Guardian*, September 7, 2019; accessed on 8.9.2019: 8.18 at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/06/boris-johnson-short-of-options-as-rebels-vow-to-secure-brexite-delay>

Nick Cohen, The law must step in to fill the gap left by a wounded parliament, *The Guardian*, September 7, 2019; accessed on 8.9.2019: 8.05 at

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/07/law-must-step-in-to-fill-gap-left-by-wounded-parliament-brexite?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Toby Helm, and others, Boris Johnson 'will be forced from power if he defies no-deal law', *The Guardian*, September 7, 2019; accessed on 8.9.2019: 8.12 at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/07/boris-johnson-could-trigger-constitutional-crisis-over-brexite-law>

And, for example, a long-standing, senior member of the Conservative Party and Conservative governments: Krishnan Guru Murthy, Lord Heseltine: 'we are being subjected to humiliation and ridicule by this government', Channel 4 News, 7 September 2019; accessed on 8.9.109: 8:24 at

<https://www.channel4.com/news/lord-heseltine-we-are-being-subjected-to-humiliation-and-ridicule-by-this-government>

ⁱⁱⁱ This point is not countered by the modern practices of 'opinion polling' which purport to measure the 'aspirations and hopes of voters', as it is put. The 'opinions' expressed in these surveys are not the deep, underlying opinion which at the moment of voting – *the decisive moment* – govern behaviours.

Many a government has found that the views expressed to pollsters do not necessarily translate into actual votes and so find themselves out of power. A recent and notable example of this is the case of the government headed by Theresa May in the U.K. The 'opinion' polls indicated a sweeping victory for the incumbents in 2017 – encouraging the Prime Minister to call a snap election – except they did not!

Peter Barnes, How wrong was the election polling? BBC News, Election 2017, 13 June 2017; accessed on 8.9.2019: 9.02 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-2017-40265714>

Kate Allen, Are the U.K.'s political polls wrong, again? *Financial Times Alphaville*, February 28, 2018 accessed on 8.9.2019: 8.033 at

<https://ftalphaville.ft.com/2018/02/28/2198997/are-the-uks-political-polls-wrong-again/>

Important and relevant is that this type of opinion polling is for a number of reasons, by its very nature of sampling and other methodological aspects, an entirely different matter from to the 'climate of opinion' idea here.

David Lipsey, Polling's dirty little secret: why polls have been wrong before and will be again, *The Guardian*, 25 April, 2017; accessed on 8.9.2019: 9.06 at

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/25/dirty-little-secret-opinion-polls-general-election-why-wrong>

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

^v Becker, 1932: 5; emphasis added.

^{vi} Carl Becker. *The Heavenly City of Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*: 47. Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1932.

^{vii} For example: psychology, philosophy, education, economics, theology, management, biology, and ecology.

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

^{ix} Whitehead, 1928: 29.

^x The poet W.H. Auden used this idea in his 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud (*d. September 1939*)':

"for one who'd lived among enemies so long;
If often he was wrong and, at times, absurd,
To us he is no more a person
Now but a whole climate of opinion"

W.H. Auden. *Collected Poems*: 275. Edited by Edward Mendelson. Faber and Faber, London, 1994.

<https://www.channel4.com/news/lord-heseltine-we-are-being-subjected-to-humiliation-and-ridicule-by-this-government>

^{xi} Garrett Barden, 1990: viii and 51; also 33, 37, 69, 126; emphasis added.

^{xii} Becker, 1932: 6 - 8.

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