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A Dreadful Emancipation: Walter Lippmann's Critique of Modernity

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A Dreadful Emancipation: Walter Lippmann's Critique of Modernity

[This is a working draft of a larger project on Walter Lippmann's ideas. Please do not quote except by the author's permission.]

Liberals “have forged a weapon of release but not a way of life.”¹

I. Progressive Shibboleths

Walter Lippmann began and ended his career reflecting on the problem of freedom in the modern world. Underlying these reflections ran a deep conviction that he was living through an age of such great and sweeping transition as to render inherited ways of thinking and of living suddenly obsolete. Moderns found themselves emancipated from a wide variety of restrictions, beliefs, and limitations that had previously provided the “environment” in which specific and inherited freedoms or liberties made sense. But the new environment was so vast, so complicated, that individuals cannot comprehend it, rendering the environment in which people must live and act invisible—a bewildering context that intoxicates some people because of a sense of endless possibility and enervates others because they sense that they no longer belong to a story that has meaning. Lippmann believed that in this modern age that it was the role of the public intellectual, the moral philosopher, to provide a guide on how to live well in the context of the grand emancipation that is modernity. Lippmann searched for such a guide, and produced several—all dealing with the same problem but offering different responses.

A youthful Lippmann found the newly open social, political, moral and intellectual space of the early 20th century exhilarating. Cleared of old gods, old taboos, of agrarian habits, of millennia of devotion to metaphysical essences, this dawning age for America could leave behind the accumulated weight of the past. Drawn first to a romantic vitalism, Lippmann turned soon to a progressive and scientific model for organizing social and economic life. This new model would create a new

¹ *The Phantom Public*, p. 158

“disinterested” authority by which a democratic people could transcend pluralism and form a national community based on rational purposes and human need. The new freedom of the modern era could leave us adrift, having lost our metaphysical bearings and our social, cultural and intellectual habits. Or this problem could become the opportunity to “master” our future, to command nature and society alike toward human values as seen through the undistorted eyes of science.

Not only as the author of the influential book, *Drift and Mastery*, but also as one of the founding editors of *New Republic*, Lippmann helped shape a progressive version of American liberalism—a liberalism that would long survive Lippmann’s own rejection of it. Despite his reasonably quick overcoming of progressivism, the basic “problems” or questions or themes of this new liberalism would remain alive for Lippmann throughout his career, and if he cannot be credited with the virtue of ideological consistency, he deserves admiration for his deep and ruthlessly honest meditation on the problems of liberal democracy in the modern age. Moreover, a careful examination of his intellectual journey exposes continuities that are more important than his political inconsistency. And at the heart of this meditation is the problem of emancipation, the core of which is found in our freedom **from** all inherited forms of authority.

In these early years, Lippmann was utterly untroubled by his claim that “the rock of ages...has been blasted for us.”² At this point in his career, this freedom from inherited authority was a problem of what to do with this freedom, with nary a question or concern about what might be lost. Still, the problem is a serious one in the sense that Lippmann considered that the unprecedented nature of this modern

² *Drift and Mastery*, p. 16. I think it is worth noting two points. First, Lippmann does acknowledge, in a kind of sunny academic fashion, that for a significant number of people this transition from the authority of religion and tradition to something else will be difficult. Second, his claim about the degree to which Americans had come no longer to believe in the old forms of authority were dramatically at odds with the reality of ongoing and deep persistence of traditional authority. He would later come to grips with this fact about American life.

society requires the articulation of a “vision” that shapes, creates, or articulates meaning and purpose—collective and individual. Rejecting all utopian visions, he urged his readers to concentrate on “the unfolding present” rather than nostalgic golden ages or an abstract society set in some distant future. The unfolding present usefully offers Lippmann a horizon “where thought and action count” and where “man can be creative if his vision is gathered from the promise of actual things.”³ Historical memory is useless or even harmful in the construction of such a vision, but by focusing on the unfolding present a people can apply a combination of reason and experience (relevant experience, which precludes anything from a different era) to posit, adjust, readjust—to craft an evolving and contingent vision or purpose.

Of course Lippmann’s emphasis on reason chastened by experience, on positing and modifying, springs from his belief that science offers the method that can orient people in an age without any metaphysical authority. It is a method of living forward in the context of a constantly changing environment—a method of adjustment that requires no ossified ideal or immutable morality. Lippmann, as so many progressives and pragmatists, remained elusive with regard to the meaning of “science” as applied to social organization. At times one assumes he means “scientific spirit” or a way of approaching problems that stresses an openness to what evidence, filtered through a “disinterested” reason, leads one to believe. Other times “science” stands in for a certain range of modern expertise and knowledge based loosely on the scientific model—from hard sciences to the social sciences. But whatever range of meanings that fit into a reified “science,” Lippmann and the other progressives were challenged to explain how this worked in practice, particularly as applied to a democracy where few people approach life in the unfolding present with a scientific spirit.

Democracy, nonetheless, was central to Lippmann’s progressive vision, and yet deeply problematic. The problem of democracy, which would unfold over the

³ *Drift and Mastery*, p.18.

course of decades of reflections on this “unfolding present,” would force Lippmann to re-think both authority and science. Always rejecting metaphysical or mystical descriptions of democracy, or the “will of the people,” Lippmann wanted to associate democracy with science and open-ended change. “There is nothing accidental” Lippmann asserted in *Drift and Mastery*, “in the fact that democracy in politics is the twin-brother of scientific thinking. They have come together. As absolutism falls, science arises. It is self-government....The scientific spirit is the discipline of democracy, the escape from the drift, the outlook of a free man.”⁴ Such a close and ambiguous association between democracy and science leaves more questions unresolved. How to inculcate such a scientific spirit into the people of a democracy? Lippmann assumed, in 1914, that the work of science was already so extensive in destroying the older authorities that this scientific spirit could assume the role of arbiter in a society otherwise threatened with political and moral drift.

However he understood the problems of science and democracy, Lippmann’s view required that the nation transcend the Jeffersonian localism still plaguing America in this industrial, interdependent nation. As the isolated and provincial “villages” that had characterized the American union were drawn, by the centripetal forces of modernity, into a national community, science supplied the only means for genuine community in the midst of such pluralism—“for the discipline of science is the only one which gives any assurance from the same set of facts men will come approximately to the same conclusion.”⁵ And so, beyond our differences we have available a method of analysis that will bring agreement.

The problem of liberal democracy is not finally resolved by the scientific spirit alone, for modern society is complex, interdependent and incomprehensibly big, requiring a nation to organize and plan according to the needs and purposes of the society in light of current circumstances. Such organization requires a robust

⁴ *Drift and Mastery*, p.151.

⁵ *Drift and Mastery*, p. 155.

administrative state that has access to experts in a wide variety of fields and possessing the power to standardize policies and procedures across the nation.

Still more, modern liberal democracy requires vigorous, enlightened, and charismatic leadership. A political leader, such as Theodore Roosevelt, can provide the organizing vision necessary for a nation to reform, to adjust, to move forward in the unfolding present. Politicians like William Jennings Bryan represent the worst habits of America to preserve in amber “a nation of villagers”. “Bryan,” wrote Lippmann in a scathing assault, “has never been able to adjust himself to the new world in which he lives. That is why he is so irresistibly funny to sophisticated newspaper men. His virtues, his habits, his ideas, are the simple, direct, shrewd qualities of early America. He is the true Don Quixote of our politics, for he moves in a world that has ceased to exist.”⁶ The kind of leader needed in this new America is one who feels no devotion to inherited principles and who can adopt the emerging knowledge and expertise in a vision that he can express as a “deliberate plan” to organize the cooperative potential of a great and powerful nation toward a collective or common purpose.

No matter how much a progressive conception of democracy requires enlightened leadership and a large administrative state animated with the spirit of science, it nonetheless must raise up, habituate, or cultivate a citizenry capable of participating in the ongoing task of national governance. Little wonder that education is a defining progressive ideal. In the modern age, education must begin by re-educating—liberating people from beliefs, traditions, and customs of a previous age—the age that Bryan still believed existed. For a progressive like the young Lippmann, then, education meant undermining obsolete protections of inherited authority and fixed moral codes while encouraging citizens to think in terms of a public interest in which they have a part and a stake, to accept the new “discipline”

⁶ *Drift and Mastery*, p. 81.

of science as the best means of adjusting to changing environments, and to treat “facts” rather than prejudices as the foundation of informed public opinion.

The educated citizenry—essential to any progressive vision of democracy—was the first link that failed for Lippmann in this chain of reasoning. It wouldn't be the last. Frustrated with his experiences during World War I, in which his participation in, and close study of, propaganda led him to worry about the ability to “manufacture consent”⁷ from the public. By 1919 Lippmann had begun to doubt the most mystical of progressive constructions—the public. In less than a decade he would produce three books on the public, each a more radical and compelling critique of the progressive faith in a meaningful notion of public, public interest, or public good.

In any “science” the results depend on the quality of the data, the facts, the information. If either government or private entities can control, manipulate, limit, the news that informs citizens and shapes their beliefs, then a democratic public, properly understood, is impossible. And so it was with the necessary connection between news and the shaping of public opinion that Lippmann first turned in his analysis. The result, published in 1920, was a slim volume entitled *Liberty and the News*. Reading the book from the perspective of his later books on related subjects may obscure the intellectual dynamite of this work.

Two organizing themes that had long been part of Lippmann's intellectual orientation became central points in this analysis. First, drawing from Graham Wallas' argument in *The Great Society* that in the modern world the environment in which people move and act and in which they must participate is so large as to make most of it invisible and almost unfathomable. The size of modern society makes problematic the democratic faith in the individual to make wise political choices. When society was small and local, individuals could reasonably expect to have the

⁷ Long before Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman published *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), Lippmann used the term in *Liberty and the News* (1920). P. 8.

knowledge appropriate to the environment and therefore have access to the facts relevant to making a political or policy choice. But no more—an informed choice about an environment that is invisible requires that some form of news and fact gathering and distribution provide citizens with a reliable picture of the society they inhabit and in which they are expected to participate as citizens.

Because Lippmann considered this change in the environment irreversible, he believed that the very health of both liberty and “western democracy” was at stake in fostering a reliable, objective, and thorough stream of news that can inform citizens with facts about a world they cannot experience directly. Often angry in tone, Lippmann chastised the journalists and news producers in America for having abandoned their duty to supply facts rather than opinions. He wrote: “When those who control [news columns and carriers] arrogate to themselves the right to determine by their own consciences what shall be reported and for what purpose, *democracy is unworkable*. Public opinion is blocked. For when a people can no longer confidently repair ‘to the best fountains for their information,’ then anyone’s guess and anyone’s rumor, each man’s hope and each man’s whim becomes the basis of government.” (italics added)⁸

The second assumption that Lippmann carried over from his earlier work to this analysis is that in modern America public opinion is effectively sovereign. A baffled or confused public opinion invites tyranny, threatens liberty. Lippmann’s confidence had turned to fears. Liberty is insecure in a context when “men...have lost their grip upon the relevant facts of their environment” because they become victims of propaganda. Unable to know the environment through their own experiences, people are increasingly supplied with a “pseudo-environment.”⁹

Never one to possess deep faith in the natural rationality of people, Lippmann warned that “unreason” must necessarily control public opinion when facts are

⁸ Liberty and the News, pp. 13-14.

⁹ Liberty and the News, p. 50.

unknown or are jumbled with lies, distortions, or propaganda. The inherited theory of liberty, as developed by John Milton and John Stuart Mill, predates the authority of public opinion and is ill-suited to this new context. Such a theory focused on tolerating the expression of a wide range of views, but, Lippmann argued, it rested finally on tolerating views about which society is indifferent. But the range of views about which moderns can be indifferent is smaller and differently constructed in an age when the power of public opinion is both decisive and is open to be shaped or manufactured by either government or private interests. In modern America “the really important thing is to try and make opinion increasingly responsible to the facts. There can be no liberty for a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies.”¹⁰

This line of reasoning led Lippmann back to a problem that he could not resolve in this book, though he tried. Not only did Lippmann not face directly his own view that humans, under the best of circumstances, tend to be irrational, but he was forced back to progressive answers to progressive problems. Consider this claim: “There is but one kind of unity possible in a world as diverse as ours. It is the unity of method, rather than aim; the unity of the disciplined experiment.” The resolution of the problem requires not only devotion to some method derived loosely from the scientific method, but it requires the inculcation of the scientific spirit, which leads the public to accept a “unity of methods rather than aims.” He pushed further: “There is but one bond of peace that is both permanent and enriching: the increasing knowledge of the world in which freedom occurs. With a common intellectual method and a common area of valid fact, differences may become a form of cooperation and cease to be irreconcilable antagonism.” Moreover, “that...constitutes the meaning of freedom for us.”¹¹

What Lippmann seems only partially to have acknowledged is that his definition of freedom rests on an anthropological transformation. The public must be shaped

¹⁰ *Liberty and the News*, p. 58

¹¹ *Liberty and the News*, pp. 60-61.

into a responsible public, rather than what Ortega would later call a mass. A proper public requires citizens who are rational, who have largely rejected the authority of tradition or religion, and who embrace the scientific model as the appropriate method for making political decisions. Largely ignoring this problem in his first book on the subject, Lippmann focused on the task of providing reliable information to the public.¹² But the anthropological problem would not leave him alone.

II. Knowledge, Reason, and the Public Good

In a letter to Learned Hand in 1922, just after the publication of *Public Opinion*, Lippmann asked: “Have we the right to believe that human reason can uncover the mechanism of unreason, and so in the end master it?”¹³ This question threads through Lippmann’s body of work in ways most instructive. A rationalist who sought to understand the world in all its complexity, Lippmann early accepted as undeniably true that humans are essentially irrational creatures. For this reason he had little sympathy with many academic analyses that focused on institutions to the neglect of human nature. On this he was influenced by his teacher Graham Wallas, whose book *Human Nature in Politics* shaped Lippmann’s intellectual trajectory more than any other book of his college years. Lippmann began his career with a book, *A Preface to Politics*, wherein he employed Freudian concepts as a way of accepting, understanding, and then mastering or channeling human irrationality. By the 1950s Lippmann appealed to the humanizing or civilizing clothing of Natural Law and the moral traditions of Western civilization to combat naked or primitive

¹² Lippmann’s prescription focused primarily on the education of journalists to know their job in informing public opinion. He wanted them to abandon their pet theories, to become more precise with their words, to devote themselves to the “discipline of a modernized logic,” and to “know that the world is a process.” In the process of such advice, he offered this summary: “The task of liberty, therefore, falls roughly under three heads, protection of the sources of the news, organization of the news so as to make it comprehensible, and education of human response.” (*Liberty and the News*, p. 65.) The final phrase—education of human response—is stunning in its bland assertion of re-education.

¹³ Quoted in Ronald Steel’s *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, p. 183.

desires that otherwise control human choices. Along the way from Freud to natural law, Lippmann never forgot that some mastery or control over natural humans was necessary for human flourishing.

During the second decade of Lippmann's career he began a process of adopting a philosophical tradition that ran from Plato through Aristotle, Machiavelli and Hobbes and then to Hamilton—and later in his career a wide variety of others out of the Natural Law tradition. Lippmann always drew from a variety of teachers and thinkers and one can often trace developments in his thought by following these shifting influences. Coming out of college Lippmann put together his arguments out the ideas of William James, H.G. Wells, a variety of continental thinkers, a dose of John Dewey, and, of course, the ever present Graham Wallas. Before he published *Public Opinion*, one is hard pressed to detect the influence of any thinker not alive when Lippmann came of age. But from 1922 forward, Lippmann conversed deeply with the major thinkers of the Western tradition. The change is important and suggests, among other things, that Lippmann found the constant play of the “unfolding present” unsatisfying and incapable of providing the resources he needed to answer the pressing questions or problems that defined his career. Without fully realizing it yet, Lippmann's turn to the rich resources of a western humanist tradition was a rejection of the idea of the “unfolding present” and with it the attending faith in science and democracy.

And so, *Public Opinion* begins in Plato's cave.¹⁴ Shadows seem real, knowledge is impossible for those who remain in the cave, and those who escape to see things as they really are present a comic or frightening prospect for the many. Lippmann rejected the democratic teaching that a public can be enlightened, that a democracy on the scale of a nation can educate the citizens to be rational participants in policy or governance—and, most demoralizing of all for the progressives he had abandoned, Lippmann penned one of the most devastating assault on the idea of the

¹⁴ He placed on long portion of Plato's description of the cave on the page before the table of contents. *Public Opinion*, p, vii.

citizens composing a community of purpose, a public dedicated to some higher public good.

The problem of democracy is the problem of knowledge. The dominant strain of democratic thought never acknowledged the problem since its advocates assume the capacity of citizens to have the necessary knowledge to make reasonable judgments. Lippmann associates this view of what he calls “the omnicompetent citizen” with Thomas Jefferson. Of course Jefferson spoke of a democracy on the scale of a village, where all citizens had sufficient knowledge about their environment to make reasonable choices in the context of their self-interest. Lippmann noted that at the national level the founders never supposed that they had established a democracy, much less that they should rely on citizens, scattered in hamlets and towns across a vast and diverse nation, to make informed judgments. Beginning with Andrew Jackson, the superstitions of local democracy were applied to national politics, creating an unwarranted faith in the political wisdom of ordinary citizens and developing the decisive democratic force, called public opinion.¹⁵

If public opinion is the prime power in democratic society and politics, then what is it? To define public opinion Lippmann contrasted the “world outside” with the “pictures in our heads.” The world outside is real enough and yet it is so vast and complicated that humans cannot see it as it is. Simple versions of the world, often of a comforting variety, provide us with “maps of the world” or “pictures in our heads” of how things are. “The pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by

¹⁵ Oddly, Lippmann has almost nothing to say about Alexis de Tocqueville’s extended analysis of American democracy, much less of his argument about the role of public opinion in democratic politics. His few references (which become a bit more numerous later in his career) to Tocqueville indicate only a passing knowledge of the work. At one point in *Public Opinion* Lippmann noted that there exists almost no serious analysis on public opinion before his own—a strange claim if one had read carefully *Democracy in America*. (p. 161)

individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters.”¹⁶ And so while public opinion forms a false reality, our reactions affect the real environment of which the public has a distorted view. Under the best of circumstances, decision makers have a huge task to gain a sufficiently cosmopolitan perspective to make rational choices based on available information, but when, as in modern democracy, decisions depend heavily on the influence of public opinion, drawn from almost exclusively provincial sources incapable of having the requisite information, rational policy making is impossible.

Lippmann thus declared, in contrast to his progressive colleagues and his own plaintive call for preserving the source and purity of information upon which citizens depend, that the problem of modern democracy can never be solved by seeking to make citizens competent. It is the theory of democracy that is at fault—a theory that rests uncritically on a faith in the “omnicompetence” of the citizen. Much of the brilliance of this book lies in the systematic destruction of this democratic faith—an analysis that is as damning today as it was in 1922. Among other things, Lippmann noted the speed of modern life that makes it impossible to make sense of “the great booming, buzzing confusion of the outer world” without recourse to a pre-determined model or framework that allows one to filter the information that we confront. As he put it, “we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see.”¹⁷

How much could we reasonably expect from citizens who live busy lives, who must depend upon distant sources to provide them with crucial information about the world in which they live, and whose preparation for interpreting information is necessarily limited by time, skill, and training? In order for citizens to have a reasonable hope of seeing the world as it is more clearly, they would have to digest

¹⁶ *Public Opinion*, p. 18.

¹⁷ The influence of William James is still evident here as Lippmann uses self-consciously the language of “blooming, buzzing confusion” to describe the nature of the reality we experience without the filter of cultural and linguistic forms. *Public Opinion*, pp. 54-55.

detailed and precise reports on all manner of public matters. But citizens possess a very poor vocabulary for the task of analysis. Not only do they not possess the range of words appropriate to the task, but the tendency in any language to allow words to be generalized symbols of meanings, capable of diverse and even contradictory meanings among the readers is exaggerated in democracies.¹⁸ And if democrats use words imprecisely, they operate with a very simple and false theory of causality. “The more untrained a mind,” wrote Lippmann, “the more readily it works out a theory that two things which catch its attention at the same time are causally connected.”¹⁹

The weakness in the rational faculties of a democratic public make it vulnerable to propaganda and to concerted efforts by government or powerful private interests to shape the pictures in people’s heads—to manufacture public opinion. If those who seek to manufacture opinion know how to use symbols well and to craft a coherent accounting of selective facts, then the consumers of such propaganda have no access to resources by which to challenge the pictures with which they are presented.

Because the “public” is not capable of self-articulation or of deliberation, its role is limited but powerful. The public cannot choose leaders, it cannot choose policies, it cannot articulate a vision for the nation, it cannot in any meaningful way be creative. Rather the primary power of the public is to say “yes or no.” A small group of people choose the slate of possible leaders from which the public may choose. A few powerful people articulate a vision and set of policies that they present to the public, and the public can vote for or against such people. The public can say yes to the party in power or it can side with the party that has not been in power. But the public is powerless to create its own vision.

¹⁸ Lippmann’s analysis of language appears, primarily in chapter 5. His argument about the tendency to general words in public discourse and to the way that words increasingly express rich and ambiguous images, does not press as far as one might expect. This is one example of Lippmann making arguments that Tocqueville made much better.

¹⁹ *Public Opinion*, p. 99.

In diagnosis, *Public Opinion* remains a masterpiece of analysis. But Lippmann's attempt to outline a remedy is unconvincing, even to the author who soon wrote a book rejecting it. It is, nonetheless, instructive in several ways. For one, Lippmann's longstanding defense of what one might call Machiavellian *virtu*, finds subtle expression in this book on the failings of democratic theory. If propaganda by the Hearsts and Pulitzers dismayed Lippmann, he admired the manly virtue of great leaders who can offer a compelling vision, whose strength of will gives both direction and energy to public opinion. If Jeffersonianism is the problem of American democracy, Hamiltonianism is a desirable alternative.

Oddly, however, Lippmann's more developed response to the failings of modern democracy was to advocate the administrative state—a state administered by the emerging knowledge of experts. Rather than putting science as the means for democratic participation, he wants to give science the role of administering a democracy in a manner that is in the best interest of the citizens, who themselves cannot know what is in their best interest. While it isn't exactly rule by the competent, it is a vision that requires that technical expertise be pressed into service of making intelligible the vast and complex environment that leaders require to make rational decisions.

Social scientists, he admitted, have few accomplishments to show for their work—but “the social scientist will acquire his dignity and his strength when he has worked out his method. He will do that by turning into opportunity the need among directing men of the Great Society for instruments of analysis by which an invisible and most stupendously difficulty environment can be made intelligible.” This looks more like faith than reason. But at its heart is the belief that with an evolving method of analysis that in the social realm we can develop “disinterested” analysis that supplies, in some part of the our environment, a clear and accurate picture of how things really are. Unlike his earlier prescription in *Liberty and the News*, where he thought that preserving objective information flows to the citizens would

produce good government and policy, Lippmann turned to clusters of experts who, collectively, could do what newspapers could never—provide a reasonably accurate picture of the invisible environment. In 1920 Lippmann accepted the competence of the citizen to take reliable information and shape a reasonably accurate picture of the world he inhabits—by 1922 he transferred that role to social scientists.

Key to Lippmann's thinking on this subject is that knowledge of one's environment is the prerequisite for making rational choices. Accepting Aristotle's claims that democracy must be limited to the "range of their vision" to be workable, Lippmann suggested that the progress of social science and technical knowledge makes possible the creation of a true picture of this vast environment. But beyond this, in the closing chapters of this skeptical book, Lippmann anticipated that the expansion of objective knowledge generated by a maturing class of experts will cultivate in the public itself a "reeducation" to defer to those who possess the knowledge, and for themselves to do what has heretofore been rare—develop a passion for reason. In the end Lippmann advocated what he had claimed was impossible earlier in his book—the cultivation of an educated citizenry that can form a rational public. Almost as soon as his book was published, Lippmann undermined his own remedy, and his irrational faith.

Lippmann's book really poses the epistemological problem of democracy: how can those who rule possess the knowledge necessary to rule well? Aristotle's answer was correct with regard to democracy as such—only a polis small enough for the citizens to know their environment well can be truly self-governing. If the environment of the democracy is too vast and complicated to make knowledge of it possible, then Plato's cave serves as the more reasonable description of the public—governed by opinions generated by image-makers. As much as Lippmann wanted to rehabilitate the public that he had so powerfully analyzed, he could not.

When Lippmann couldn't rehabilitate the public, he decided to shatter it—to destroy utterly the progressive fantasy of a general will or of the public as national

community. And whenever Lippmann brought out Occam's razor, he did so with ruthless consistency, usually in a fit of remorse for his own misplaced idealism. And both of these he did in his 1927 book, *The Phantom Public*. Not only did he label the grounding assumptions of democracy "false ideals," but he argued that holding these ideals is harmful—and even if we are in no position to offer a remedy for this romantic myth of democracy, we are best served by paying tribute to truth. Better to be "disenchanted" than to believe the shadows on the wall.²⁰

It is hard to read *The Phantom Public* without feeling Lippmann's relief or liberation from having to defend misty dreams of progressive liberals. Written with clear, direct, and punchy prose, and with devastatingly simple logic, *The Phantom Public* clears the deck of the fuzzy language, the distorting reifications, and the moralizing nonsense of progressivism. For some readers—then and now—his argument may sound too narrowly analytical, and yet Lippmann was at his best, his most authentic, when he was de-mythologizing. When he dismissed the claim that a vote is "the expression of our mind" as "an empty fiction," Lippmann was not only seeking precision and clarity, but highlighting democratic bombast and the lazy habit of attributing a simple and clear causality to collective choices. Voting is nothing more than "a promise of support."²¹ To read an electoral victory as a clear statement of public opinion is absurd, even if doing so reinforces our democratic myth of some organic or even mythical body called the public. "The decision to make the mark [i.e., vote] may be for reasons $a^1, a^2, a^3 \dots a^n$: the result, whether an idiot or a genius has voted, is A." Moreover, "the more complex the collection of men the more ambiguous must be the unity and the simpler the common ideas."²²

²⁰ In the final paragraph of the book, Lippmann wrote: "I have no legislative program to offer, no new institutions to propose. There are, I believe, immense confusions in the current theory of democracy which frustrate and pervert its action. I have attacked certain of the confusions with no conviction except that a false philosophy tends to stereotype thought against the lessons of experience." *The Phantom Public*, p. 190.

²¹ *The Phantom Public*, pp. 46-47.

²² *The Phantom Public*, p. 39.

Tired of “national souls, and oversouls, and collective souls” invented by people seeking to find a moral unity that absorbs and incorporates all the elements of our manifest pluralism, Lippmann wanted to emphasize the constant change that is part of all human life, including political life. Rather than beginning with abstract or universal moral codes—which are so easy to declare—Lippmann, following the teaching of Socrates, argued that a code of right and wrong must wait upon a perception of the true and the false.” Knowledge is virtue and any claim of ought must rest on a deep knowledge of what is.

Modern America possesses no overarching authority, no myth or story that compels universal or near-universal assent. Rather, a welter of moral systems and other beliefs produce the environment in which any serious political system must function. The tendency in democracy to foster universalist categories only hides the truth behind a metaphysical or moral cloak. “An established right,” he wrote, “is a promise that a certain kind of behavior will be backed by the organized force of the state or at least by the sentiment of the community; a duty is a promise that failure to respect the rights of others in a certain way will be punished.”²³ There is nothing fixed about rights and duties and to invest them with more fixed and transcendent meaning only leads to harmful confusions.

Of course the primary reification that Lippmann dissolves is the public—the repository of most important liberal dreams. In his previous book, Lippmann challenged the belief in the omniscient citizen and the expectation that through education and reliable information that the public can, in a modern democracy, deliberate or form informed opinions. He held out hope that the public could be led by experts who accept the scientific discipline and can produce the “disinterested” knowledge that allow reason to overcome provincial stereotypes and limited vision. In *The Phantom Public* there is no longer a public; information flows overwhelm and confuse citizens; there is no disinterested knowledge class that can lead a

²³ *The Phantom Public*, pp. 90-91.

democratic public; and political power is essentially a struggle between small groups of people who only rarely rouse popular sentiment for or against their positions.

The closest thing to a public opinion, in Lippmann's view, is an emotion rather than an ideology or political philosophy. The struggle among the contending groups of political figures for public support amounts to "the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas." Ideas rarely move people—but playing to emotions allows political figures "to make a homogeneous will out of a heterogeneous mass of desires." When political matters are of matters of visible significance or when citizens are dissatisfied or a clear crisis emerges, "the victorious alternative is executed not by the mass but by individuals in control of its energy."²⁴

Because there is no "public" that can act on its own and because the energy latent in the mass of citizens is only marshaled by political leaders, the study of modern democracy must be about the means by which political leaders can constitute a public when they need one. Any analytical definition of a public (rather than "the" public) is relative to the issue—publics form because groups of citizens are "interested" in a policy or political question. The public that applies to the regulation of railroads will include farmers who rely on railroads to get their crops to market, it will include railroad unions, and a variety of groups for whom policy changes will affect their lives. No reified Public capable of making "disinterested" decisions for the good of the nation will ever be constituted for such a political fight. Civic education and a reliable press will not alter this fact. In the broadest sense, the only work or role that these publics can play is to support either those who have power (the "ins") or to move their energy and support to those who have been

²⁴ *The Phantom Public*, pp. 37-38.

advocating change (the “outs”). However unromantic this description of public deliberation, Lippmann argued that it “is the essence of popular government.”²⁵

Lippmann was not content with demythologizing liberal ideals of democratic participation. He made a case for the harm of liberal ideals—and a case for a Machiavellian science of democratic politics. He wrote, for instance:

A false of ideal of democracy can led only to disillusionment and to meddlesome tyranny. If democracy cannot direct affairs, then a philosophy which expects it to direct them will encourage the people to attempt the impossible; they will fail, but that will interfere outrageously with the productive liberties of the individual. The public must be put in its place, so that it may exercise its own powers, but no less and perhaps even more, so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd.²⁶

Liberalism—to employ a reification that Lippmann tolerated—had elevated the common person, had liberated people from a great many restraints, had educated them to think of themselves as equal parts of the democratic process, but it had not taught the people the role that they could reasonably play. Liberalism had fostered the conditions for a new kind of tyranny—“of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd.”

In the concluding short chapters of *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann restated, reoriented, the defining questions of his career in a way that would lead to his magnum opus, *A Preface to Morals* (1929). How can we live well, how can we be genuinely free in an age liberated from authoritative myths that define human meaning and give direction to human conduct? In a little more than a decade Lippmann had travelled from celebrating this liberation as the precondition for human mastery to a more mature meditation on the challenges of living in an open-ended universe.

²⁵ *The Phantom Public*, p. 116.

²⁶ *The Phantom Public*, p. 145.

It would be convenient to lump much of Lippmann's writings in the 1920s into the broad category of the lost generation or even attach him to the strange cult of disillusionment of the era. A few passages here and there suggest connections with Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Modern Temper*, but it would be a mistake to attach to Lippmann such debilitating pessimism. Lippmann's work in this period bears two characteristics—an attempt to describe precisely and fairly the problem of freedom and authority in America at the time and to articulate a manly and affirming response that rejects self-indulgent nihilism.²⁷

The problem with liberals is that “they have forged a weapon of release but not a way of life.” While the precise meaning of “liberalism” is never clear in Lippmann's work, here it incorporates the great emancipation project that extends back to the Enlightenment and whose primary tool is the ability to bring to doubt beliefs or ideas that had for so long been authoritative. Liberalism, in his construction, introduced into American society broadly a historicism—a recognition that all human ideals are products of time and place, of culture and experience, and therefore not universally valid. Such liberation from inherited authority might, as he advocated in *Drift and Mastery*, give new space for a democratic people to define for themselves their lives, their goals their purposes, their chosen telos. But the essentially negative project—the freeing from inherited beliefs and ideas—did not provide effective means for living forward in this new environment. Liberalism leads to drift.

Unlike all “political philosophies which active men have lived by,” liberalism “attempted to eliminate the hero entirely.” Since liberalism accepted the mystical abstraction of the public, of the people, it believed that it had escaped the “ancient problem of the One and the Many.” In due course, liberalism (i.e., progressivism) loses sight not only of heroes, but of the individual as such. As the “Great Society”

²⁷ One of the most penetrating analyses of the self-indulgent nihilism of many 1920s intellectuals is Christopher Lasch's brief “The Illusion of Disillusionment.” *New Oxford Review* LVIII, no. 7 (July-August 1991): 12-14.

produced ever-greater interdependence and shielded more and more the real environment from people, the individual became increasingly small and isolated. Local answers to problems were increasingly rare and ineffective—as the prohibition issue proved—and as the causes that effected people’s lives become more remote, an increasingly centralized government that must deal comprehensively with any issue, becomes necessary. As local rule recedes and local consent (to say nothing about deliberation) unnecessary, the wellsprings of local political talent dry up. Citizens, disconnected from regular participation in decisions that matter, focus more on self-expression than civic participation.

Lippmann concludes *The Phantom Public* with a description of a democratic system that traffics in abstractions, that believes in the consent of the people while forced to ever more centralized means of addressing the problems of the Great Society. The personification of the public only hides the real mechanisms of power while ignoring the greatest political need of all—the education and development of leaders who possess the knowledge (*virtu*) to lead a people.

III. Emancipation and the Problem of Freedom

If the public is a phantom, majority rule or power is very real and a threat to liberty, according to Lippmann. In response to two court trials concerning public education, Lippmann wrote his most under-appreciated book, *American Inquisitors*, in which he warned that the powers of majorities in America were dangers to liberty. In Tennessee a state law prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools led to the so-called Scopes Monkey trial. Bringing to the same courtroom Clarence Darrow, defender of a crude form of Social Darwinism, and William Jennings Bryan, the long-time defender of the common man against the power of concentrated economic power, the trial was the first great media event in America. The other trial, nearly forgotten today, concerned the right of Chicago political leaders to

dictate the content of history texts taught in public schools so as to reflect an appropriately patriotic view (i.e., anti-British view).

Given the centrality of education to the progressive agenda, it was inevitable that the expansion of public-funded education would spark debates about who should decide what is taught, and by what criteria. Lippmann's analysis is much more complex and subtle than most commentators as he sought to raise the defining themes of popular rule and place them in the context of modern challenges to religious authority.

Originally delivered as lectures at the University of Virginia, the public university founded by Thomas Jefferson as testimony to his faith in the power and persuasion of reason in a democratic society, Lippmann chose to make Jefferson's philosophical and political beliefs the primary object of his criticism. He noted a curious similarity between Jefferson's "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom" of 1786 and the anti-evolutionary law from Tennessee. Despite the differences "in spirit and purpose" of these two documents, they were bound together by this wording from the Virginia statute which says that "to compel a man *to furnish contributions of money* for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical." (Italics in Lippmann's text.)²⁸ Because the Tennessee law applied only to teaching using public funds, its defenders could easily agree with Jefferson's argument that it was sinful to force people to pay for the propagation of opinions that they do not believe. Given that the majority of people in the state did not accept the science of evolution, to tax them to fund the propagation of this idea would violate Jefferson's dictum. And so it was here, where the tension between those who defend reason and those who defend majority rule was so manifestly evident, that Lippmann sought to explore the contradictions in the prevailing democratic theory.

²⁸ *American Inquisitors*, p. 12.

To explore these tensions, Lippmann used several fictional conversations. He began by bringing to Olympus Socrates, Jefferson, and William Jennings Bryan. Bryan, who became in the Scopes trial the voice of popular rule, understood himself to be a Jeffersonian—and despite Jefferson's own complaints, Lippmann found that Bryan was correct with regard to his defense of popular democracy. Socrates, not only the notorious questioner, but also a man famed for dying at the hands of majority rule, challenges the idealistic rationalism of Jefferson.

When Socrates establishes that Jefferson believes both in majority rule and that reason will prevail in free inquiry, he asks the American president about the official beliefs of the state. "None" came the answer of the naïve rationalist. Lippmann, speaking through Socrates, responded:

I don't understand you. You say there were many people in your day who believed that God had revealed the truth about the universe. You then tell me that officially your citizens had to believe that human reason and not divine revelation was the source of truth, and yet you say your state has no official beliefs. It seems to me it had a very definite belief....Let us be frank. Did you not overthrow a state religion based on revelation and establish in its place the religion of rationalism?

Lippmann introduced the problem inherent in asking questions of religious authority. What he later called "the acids of modernity," the questioning spirit, calls revelation to the bar of human reason and therefore challenges in this very process the precondition for religious authority as a public principle.

Jefferson, as Lippmann characterized him, accepted both the "fundamental right" of the majority to rule and the "fundamental right" of freedom of thought. The contradiction between these inevitably, Lippmann argued, favors one side over the other. "For it is a curious fact that in the conflict between reason and authority, the conflict itself is a victory for reason." The "inquisitions" from democratic majorities are evidence of retreat and, more importantly, a defensiveness of the sort that killed Socrates.

Socrates declared that “reason has never been popular” and despite Jefferson’s faith in the power of reason to persuade, Socrates insisted that common people naturally fear reason because it serves as a competitor religion. Reason, or the “scientific spirit” breeds habitual doubt, skepticism—common people “want ideas which they can count upon” rather than a tolerant skepticism. The life of reason or science requires freedom, but very few people can be free. Socrates was free because he wanted very little, “but people are never free who want more than they can have. Their wants create worries, their worries create prejudices, their prejudices demand guaranties, and under freedom of thought nothing is guaranteed.”²⁹ The blithe attack by H.L. Menken or Clarence Darrow on the beliefs on the many is destructive to freedom for it destroys—in a manner that is offensive—the authority that provides most people with safeguards to self-rule. Meanwhile, many such critics of religious authority have come to depend on their own deterministic religion just as much, and so do not live by the scientific spirit.³⁰ For others, refusing to understand the differences among humans, the differences of soul between the many and those who are capable of the philosophical life, they naively destroy those they seek to liberate—and rather than safeguard reason, they likely will unleash irrationality since the needs of most people are not satisfied by a life of reason.

Lippmann mercilessly pilloried the faux sophisticate know as the Christian modernist—an intellectual type of the 1920s who accepted without fear or angst (or great thought) the basic moral truths of Christianity while rejecting the supportive cosmic narrative presumed by fundamentalists as literally true. In a dialogue between the modernist and the fundamentalist, Lippmann offered a logical, consistent, informed, and rhetorically brilliant fundamentalist to destroy the

²⁹ *American Inquisitors*, pp., 45-49.

³⁰ Lippmann, using Socrates, characterized Clarence Darrow this way: “When Mr. Darrow was younger than he is today, scientific men found the hypothesis of mechanism rather convenient. Mr. Darrow has been teaching this hypothesis as gospel ever since. He is very orthodox. It is a sad and kindly religion which may have quite a vogue.” *American Inquisitors*, p. 43.

modernist argument.³¹ The modernist, when the discussion turns to education, wants to teach students in the questioning spirit and he wants them to learn to judge all claims on the authority by their own reason—in other words, to systematically reject the belief that one should accept tradition and revelation as authority. “Each youngster is,” the Fundamentalist notes, “under your system, to face the temptations and perplexities of the world with nothing more than a tentative moral code which he is at liberty to revise as he sees fit. How do you distinguish this beautiful theory from sheer moral anarchy?”

The exchange between the Modernist and the Fundamentalist about the source of moral authority is instructive in many ways. In Lippmann’s view, the modernist is naïve and possesses a faith in common sense and human decency to replace the religious authority that had previously supplied humans with their moral code. The modernist accepts human goodness and natural ability to discern a morality without supernatural support. The Fundamentalist does not deny that some people (the few) are capable of living by the highest moral standards, but Lippmann has him express his own views that the modernist’s “natural man is a natural barbarian, grasping, selfish, lustful and murderous.” The hope for a moral society is the transformation of human will and nature—the civilizing of barbarian instincts. All popular morality has “had some sort of supernatural sanction.”

The Fundamentalist, speaking for Lippmann, presents the Modernist as ignorant about human nature and political reality. The modernist wishes to inculcate the scientific method in people who cannot understand it. Because he does not understand fundamentalism or most religious authority, he is blind to the need that religious faith has to present itself as unquestioned authority. He proposes a life of metaphysical uncertainty unaware that most humans cannot tolerate such uncertainty. What Lippmann wanted to stress was that doubt is the essence of the

³¹ Lippmann probably modeled the Fundamentalist after the scholar John Gresham Machen of Princeton, whom Lippmann admired. The Modernist might have been Shailer Mathews of the University of Chicago.

life of reason but it is deadly to the life of faith as lived by the majority of believers. The Fundamentalist had the last word (after he had brought the Modernist to doubt his own premise): “[F]or me an eternal plan of salvation is at stake. For you there is nothing at stake but a few tentative opinions none of which means anything to your happiness. Your request that I should be tolerant and amiable is, therefore, a suggestion that I submit the foundation of my life to the destructive effects of your skepticism, your indifference, your good nature. You ask me to smile and to commit suicide.”³²

Lippmann’s answer to the problem of education in a democracy, however, is far from clear or, I suspect, satisfying for most readers. He characterizes the teacher as someone who ought not teach modernism or fundamentalism, but someone who fosters a transition from one to the other. A teacher is not simply concerned with the truth, but with the means of communicating the truth, the desirability of communicating the truth, and even the possibility of such communication. In this sense he must take seriously the spiritual needs of his students. A prudent respect for the prejudices of his students and their families will impel the teacher to be sometimes esoteric in his teaching.

But underneath all of these tortured questions of how to live between faith and science, in an age when humans have been liberated but without any clear objective in mind, Lippmann grappled with how to manage this transition. He did not seem to admit that this is a reversible trend or that once religious authority has been forced to defend itself that it can indefinitely survive the acids of modernity. But neither does he accept that most humans are capable of living well without recourse to metaphysical certainty. The future is unknowable and human creativity is unpredictable, he noted. And then, in ways as oblique as in *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann points vaguely to the need for leaders whose grasp of reality, of human need, is so keen that they will provide a new ordering principle that will protect the

³² *American Inquisitors*, pp. 65-66.

many from debilitating uncertainty without abandoning the freedom of the few.³³ And this is as far as Lippmann could take us—to what he thought was a clear-eyed view of the present reality and the compelling need for a leader who has escaped the naïve tyranny of an inherited democratic idealism.

As the 1920s came to a close, Lippmann had abandoned most of his progressive shibboleths and had come to understand the great emancipation brought about by science, technology, and intellectual transformations as a particularly dangerous episode in western civilization. The liberation of the many in the great democratic transformation of the modern era did not promise wisdom or the triumph of reason. The rise of science, and particularly of social science, did not prepare the way for an age of objective knowledge and dispassionate debate. In an age of almost unprecedented personal liberty, the dissolution of inherited forms of authority did not guarantee that the individual will long be free from the majority. During the next fifteen years Lippmann crafted, in fits and starts, without the consistency of a systematic philosopher, a response to the dreadful emancipation. Beginning with *A Preface to Morals* (1929) in which he presented a stoic defense of individual virtue in the midst of the moral whirl of modern society, he eventually attempted to offer a secular, humanist version of natural law as the essentialist grounding for political life. From an advocate of science to a defender of virtue, this is the broad trajectory of Lippmann's lifetime struggle to respond to the modern emancipation. The books examined in this paper expose the period of his career when he could no longer believe in progressivism but had not yet found his way to natural law.

³³ See, for instance, his brief discussion of a new kind of leader on page 117.