

**Critical Models** *Interventions and Catchwords*

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*Translated by Henry W. Pickford*  
*Introduction by Lydia Goehr*

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## **O***pinion Delusion Society*

Despite its several meanings, the concept of *public* opinion is widely accepted in a positive sense. Derived from the philosophical tradition since Plato, the concept of opinion *in general* is neutral, value-free, in so far as opinions can be either right or wrong. Opposed to both these concepts of opinion is the notion of pathogenic, deviant, delusional opinions, often associated with the concept of prejudice. According to this simple dichotomy there is, on the one hand, something like healthy, normal opinion and, on the other, opinion of an extreme, eccentric, bizarre nature. In the United States, for instance, the views of fascistic splinter groups are said to belong to the *lunatic fringe*\*, an insane periphery of society. Their pamphlets, whose body of ideas also includes ritual murders and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* despite their having been conclusively disproved, are considered "farcical." Indeed, in such products one can scarcely overlook an element of madness, which nevertheless is quite likely the very ferment of their effect. Yet precisely that should make one suspicious of an inference habitually drawn from the widely held idea: namely, that in the majority the normal opinion necessarily prevails over the delusional one. The naive liberal reader of the *Berliner Tageblatt* between the wars thought no differently when he imagined the world to be one of *common sense*\* that, although troubled by rabid extremists on the right and the left, nonetheless must be right in the end. So great was the trust in normal opinion versus the

*idée fixe* that many elderly gentlemen continued to believe their favorite paper long after it had been forced into line by the National Socialists who, cleverly enough, retained only the paper's original masthead.<sup>1</sup> What those subscribers experienced when their prudence toppled overnight into helpless folly as soon as things no longer followed the approved rules of the game should have made them critically examine the naive view of opinion as such, which depicts a peaceful and separate juxtaposition of normal and abnormal opinion. Not only is the assumption that the normal is true and the deviant is false itself extremely dubious but so is the very glorification of mere opinion, namely, of the prevailing one that cannot conceive of the true as being anything other than what everyone thinks. Rather, so-called pathological opinion, the deformations due to prejudice, superstition, rumor, and collective delusion that permeate history, particularly the history of mass movements, cannot at all be separated from the concept of opinion *per se*. It would be difficult to decide *a priori* what to ascribe to one kind of opinion and what to the other; history also admits the possibility that in the course of time hopelessly isolated and impotent views may gain predominance, either by being verified as reasonable or in spite of their absurdity. Above and beyond that, however, pathological opinion, the deformed and lunatic aspects within collective ideas, arises within the dynamic of the concept of opinion itself, in which inheres the real dynamic of society, a dynamic that produces such opinions, false consciousness, necessarily. If resistance to that dynamic is not to be condemned at the outset to harmlessness and helplessness, then the tendency toward pathological opinion must be derived from normal opinion.

Opinion is the positing, no matter how qualified, of a subjective consciousness restricted in its truth content. The form of such an opinion may actually be innocuous. If someone says that in his opinion the new faculty building is seven stories high, then that can mean that he heard it from someone else but does not know exactly. Yet the sense is completely different when someone says that at all events in his opinion the Jews are an inferior race of vermin, as in Sartre's instructive example of Uncle Armand, who feels special because he detests the English.<sup>2</sup> Here the "in my opinion" does not qualify the hypothetical judgment, but underscores it. By proclaiming his opinion—unsound, unsubstantiated by experience, conclusive without any deliberation—to be his own, though he may appear to qualify it, simply by relating the opinion to himself as subject he in fact lends it an authority: that of a profession of faith. What comes across is that he stands behind his statement with heart and soul; he supposedly has the courage to say what is unpopular but in truth all too popular. Conversely, when confronted with a convincing and well-

grounded judgment that nevertheless is discomfiting and cannot be refuted, there is an all too prevalent tendency to disqualify it by declaring it to be mere opinion. A lecture on the hundredth anniversary of Schopenhauer's death<sup>a</sup> presented evidence that the difference between Schopenhauer and Hegel is not so absolute as Schopenhauer's own invectives would indicate and that both thinkers unwittingly converge in the emphatic concept of the negativity of existence. A newspaper reporter, who may have known nothing about Hegel other than that Schopenhauer reviled him, qualified his account of the lecturer's thesis with the addendum "in his view," thus giving himself an air of superiority over thoughts he in fact could hardly follow, let alone evaluate. The opinion was the reporter's, not the lecturer's: the latter had recognized something. Yet, whereas he suspected the lecturer of mere opinion, the reporter himself had for his own benefit already obeyed a mechanism that foists opinion—namely, his own unauthoritative one—on his readers as a criterion of truth and thereby virtually abolishes the latter.

Things rarely remain at the level of such innocuous opinions as how many floors a new building might have. Of course, the individual can reflect upon his opinion and guard against hypostatizing it. Yet the very category of opinion, as an objective state of mind, is shielded against such reflection. This is first of all due to simple facts of individual psychology. Whoever has an opinion about a question that is still relatively open and undecided, and likewise the answer to which cannot be as easily verified as the number of floors in a building, tends to cling to that opinion or, in the language of psychoanalysis, to invest it with affect. It would be foolish for anyone to claim to be innocent of this tendency. The tendency is based on *narcissism*, that is, on the fact that human beings to this day are obliged to withhold a measure of their ability to love from, for instance, other loved ones, and instead to love themselves in a repressed, unacknowledged, and therefore insidious manner. Personal opinion becomes, as one's possession, an integral component of one's person, and anything that weakens that opinion is registered by one's unconscious and preconscious as though it were a personal injury. Self-righteousness, the propensity to insist on defending ridiculous opinions even when their falsity has become obvious to reason, attests to the prevalence of this sit-

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<sup>a</sup> Cf. Max Horkheimer, "Die Aktualität Schopenhauers," in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Sociologica II: Reden und Vorträge*, 2d ed. (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1967), 124ff. [Translator's note: English: "Schopenhauer Today," in *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse*, eds. Kurt H. Wolff and Barrington Moore, Jr. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 55–71.]

uation. Solely in order to ward off the narcissistic injury he undergoes in exposing his opinion, the self-opinionated person develops an acumen that often far surpasses his intellectual means. The cleverness that is expended in the world for the purpose of defending narcissistic nonsense would probably be sufficient to change what is being defended. Reason in the service of unreason—in Freud's language, "rationalization"—rushes to the aid of opinion and so hardens it that nothing more can affect it or reveal its absurdity.<sup>3</sup> Sublime theoretical systems have been built upon the most insane opinions. With regard to the genesis of such a hardened opinion—and its genesis is also its pathogenesis—one may go beyond psychology. The positing of an opinion, the mere statement that something is such and such, already implies the potential for fixation, reification, even before the psychological mechanisms come into play that bewitch the opinion into a fetish. The logical form of a judgment, regardless of whether it is right or wrong, has in it something lordly, proprietary, that is then reflected in the insistence upon opinions as though they were property. Having an opinion at all, judging, already to a certain extent seals itself off from experience and tends toward delusion, while on the other hand only the person capable of judging possesses reason. This is perhaps the most profound and irredeemable contradiction inherent in holding an opinion.

Without a firmly held opinion, without hypostatizing something that is not fully known—that is, without accepting something as the truth while it is impossible to be completely certain that it is the truth—experience, indeed the very preservation of life, is hardly possible. The timid pedestrian who hesitates at the yellow light, judging that if he now crosses the street he will be hit by a car, is not completely sure that this will actually occur. The next automobile could be driven by a humane driver for once, who will not immediately step on the gas.<sup>4</sup> But the moment the pedestrian were to rely on that and cross the street on the light he would, simply because he is no prophet, most probably be killed. In order to behave as the common sense of self-preservation dictates, the pedestrian must, as it were, exaggerate. All thinking is exaggeration, in so far as every thought that is one at all goes beyond its confirmation by the given facts. Yet this difference between thought and its factual confirmation harbors the potential for delusion as well as for truth. Delusion can then really appeal to the fact that, in general, no thought can ever be given the guaranty that the expectation it contains will not be disappointed. There are no discretely conclusive, absolutely reliable, independent criteria; the decision is taken only through a structure of complex mediations. Husserl once pointed out that the individual must presume

the validity of innumerable propositions he can neither reduce to their conditions nor completely verify. The daily interaction with technology, which is no longer the privilege of a specialized training, incessantly gives rise to such situations. The difference between opinion and reasoned insight, namely that insight should be verified opinion, as the usual epistemological theory holds, was mostly an empty promise only rarely fulfilled by empirical acts of knowledge; individually and collectively, human beings are also obliged to operate with opinions that are in principle beyond examination. Yet as the difference between opinion and insight itself thereby slips away from lived experience and hovers on the horizon as an abstract assertion, it forfeits its substance subjectively, in the consciousness of people. People have no means available to defend themselves readily against the suspicion that their opinions are in fact reasoned insights and their reasoned insights mere opinions. If philosophers since Heraclitus have carped at the many for remaining captive to mere opinion instead of knowing the true essence of things, then their elitist thinking only put the blame on the *underlying population*\* for what properly lies with the institution of society. For the authority that relieves people of the decision between opinion and truth, deferred *ad kalendas Graecas*, is society. The *communis opinio* replaces truth, factually, ultimately indirectly even in many positivistic theories of epistemology. What is deemed true and what mere opinion—that is, chance and caprice—is not decided according to the evidence, as the ideology would have it, but rather by societal power, which denounces as mere caprice whatever does not agree with its own caprice. The border between healthy and pathogenic opinion is drawn *in praxi* by the prevailing authority, not by informed judgment.

The more blurred this border becomes, the more unrestrained and rampant opinion grows. Its corrective, that is, the means by which opinion can become knowledge, is the relation of thought to its object. By satiating itself with its object, thought transforms and divests itself of the element of arbitrariness. Thinking is no mere subjective activity but, as philosophy at its height recognized, essentially the dialectical process between subject and object in which both poles first mutually determine each other. The very organ of thinking, prudence, consists not only in the formal strength of the subjective faculty to form concepts, judgments, and conclusions correctly but at the same time in the ability to apply this faculty to what is unlike it. The moment called cathexis in psychology, thought's affective investment in the object, is not extrinsic to thought, not merely psychological, but rather the condition of its truth. Where cathexis atrophies, intelligence becomes stultified. A first indication of

this is blindness to the difference between the essential and inessential. Something of this stupidity triumphs whenever the mechanisms of thought run of their own accord, like an engine idling, when they substitute their own formalisms and systemic definitions in place of the matter itself. Traces of this are contained in the opinion that, entrenched solely within itself, continues without meeting any resistance. Opinion is above all consciousness that does not yet have its object. Should such consciousness progress merely by dint of its own motor, without contact with what it intends and what it actually must begin by grasping, then it has an all too easy time of it. Opinion, as *ratio* still separated from its object, obeys a kind of economy of forces, following the path of least resistance, when it abandons itself completely to simple logical consistency. Opinion sees logical consistency as a merit, whereas in many ways such consistency is the lack of what Hegel called "freedom toward the object," that is, the freedom of thought to lose and transform itself in its encounter with the subject matter.<sup>5</sup> Brecht very graphically contrasted such thought with the principle that he who says A must not say B.<sup>6</sup> Mere opinion tends toward that inability to stop that may be called 'pathological projection.'<sup>b</sup>

However, the constant proliferation of opinions is likewise grounded in the object itself. For naive consciousness the opacity of the world is obviously increasing, whereas in so many aspects it is becoming more and more transparent. The predominance of this opacity, which prevents the thin façade from being penetrated, reinforces such naiveté rather than diminishing it, as the innocent faith in education would believe.<sup>7</sup> Yet whatever eludes the grasp of sufficient knowledge is usurped by its imitation: opinion. Opinion deceptively removes the otherness between the epistemological subject and the reality that slips away from him, but that very alienation betrays itself in the inadequacy of mere opinion. Because the world is not our world, because it is heteronomous, it can express itself only distortedly in stubborn and inflexible opinions, and such delusion within opinions in turn ultimately tends to increase the predominance of alienation in totalitarian systems. Therefore, it is not enough for knowledge or for a transformative praxis to reveal the nonsense of immensely popular views, according to which people submit themselves to character typologies and predictions that a commercially revived and

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<sup>b</sup> Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1947), 220ff. [Translator's note: Reference is to the chapter "Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 168–208.]



standardized astrology ascribes to the signs of the zodiac.<sup>c</sup> People turn themselves into a Taurus or a Virgo not only because they are stupid enough to heed the suggestions of newspaper columns implying that there obviously is something to the whole exercise but also because those clichés and that idiotic practical advice, which merely reiterates what has to be done anyway, give them, no matter how spuriously, some orientation and momentarily soothe their feelings of alienation from life, even from their own lives. Mere opinion's vigorous powers of resistance can be explained by its psychological function. It proffers explanations through which contradictory reality can without great exertion be rendered free of contradiction. And there is the narcissistic satisfaction that the facile opinion affords by reinforcing its adherents' belief that they themselves have always known it, and that consequently they belong to the ones in the know. The self-confidence of the unflinchingly opinionated feels immune to every divergent, contrary judgment. This psychological function, however, is much more readily fulfilled by pathological opinions than by the supposedly healthy ones. Karl Mannheim once pointed out how ingeniously racial mania satisfies a mass-psychological need by allowing the majority to think of itself as an elite and to avenge its own intimations of weakness and inferiority upon a potentially defenseless minority.<sup>8</sup> The weakness of the ego nowadays, which beyond its psychological dimension also registers the effects of each individual's real powerlessness in the face of the societalized apparatus, would be exposed to an unbearable degree of narcissistic injury if it did not seek a compensatory identification with the power and the glory of the collective. This is why pathological opinions are particularly useful, since they ceaselessly issue from the infantile narcissistic prejudice that only "I" am good and all else is inferior and bad.

The development of opinion into its pathological variant is reminiscent of the evolution of dinosaurs that, as the increasing specialization of their organs adapted them ever more closely to the struggle for existence, in the final phase brought forth deformities and excrescences. Such a development is trivialized if it is seen to derive only from people, their

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<sup>c</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Aberglaube aus zweiter Hand," in *Sociologica II*, 142ff. [now in *GS 8:147ff.*]. [Translator's note: Original English version "The Stars Down to Earth: The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column—a Study in Secondary Superstition," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*, 2 (1957): 19–88; reprinted in *Telos* 19 (Spring 1974): 13–90; the complete original study is now in *GS 9.2:7–142* and was reprinted in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).]

psychology, or at most from a tendency within thought itself. The undermining of truth by opinion, with all the disaster it entails, is a result of what happened—irresistibly, not as an aberration that might be corrected—to the idea of truth itself. This idea of truth as an objective, unchanging, self-identical, unified being in itself, was the standard from which Plato derived the opposing concept of mere opinion, which he then criticized for being dubiously subjective. The history of spirit, however, has not left unchallenged this rigid opposition separating ideas as the true essence from the mere existence to which feeble opinions are enthralled. Very early on Aristotle objected that idea and existence are not separated by an abyss but are interdependent. The idea of autonomous truth in itself, which in Plato is opposed to opinion, *doxa*, has itself been increasingly criticized as mere opinion, and the question of objective truth has been turned back upon the subject who recognizes it—indeed who perhaps even produces such truth out of himself. At its height in Kant and Hegel, modern Western metaphysics tried to save the objectivity of truth by means of its subjectivization, finally equating truth's objectivity with the epitome of subjectivity, namely, mind. But this conception did not gain any acceptance with people, let alone in science. The natural sciences owe their most fascinating successes to their having abandoned the doctrine of the independence of truth, of pure forms, in favor of the unqualified reduction of what is true first and foremost to subjectively observed, and then processed, facts. Thus the doctrine of truth in itself was repaid with some of its own untruth by the arrogance of the subject that finally sets itself up as objectivity and truth and asserts an equality or reconciliation of subject and object that the contradictory nature of the world readily belies.

Of late the aporia of the concept of objective reason is suffering obscurantist exploitation. Since what is true and what is opinion cannot be ascertained immediately, absolutely, as though per administrative decree, their difference is simply denied, to the greater glory of opinion. The fusion of skepticism and dogmatism, of which Kant was already aware and whose tradition could be traced back to the origins of bourgeois thinking, to Montaigne's defense of Sebond,<sup>9</sup> returns with a vengeance in a society that must tremble in fear before its own reason because it is not yet reason. There is an established term for it: faith in reason. It holds that because every judgment first of all requires that the subject assume whatever is being judged to be the case, that is, that he believe in it, the difference between mere opinion or belief and well-grounded judgment is therefore rendered untenable in principle. Anyone who behaves rationally believes in *ratio* just as the irrational person believes in his dogma. For that reason, the profession of a dogmatic belief in a putatively

revealed verity presumably has the same truth content as rational insight emancipated from dogma. The abstractness of the thesis conceals its duplicity. Belief is completely different in the one case and in the other: in dogma, belief attaches itself to statements that are contrary to or incompatible with reason, whereas for reason, belief constitutes nothing other than the commitment to an intellectual posture that neither arrests nor effaces itself but advances determinately in the negation of false opinion.<sup>10</sup> Reason cannot be subsumed under any more general concept of belief or opinion. Reason finds its specific content in the critique of what falls within and aligns itself with these categories. The individual act of holding something to be true—which, by the way, a refined theology itself rejects as insufficient—is inessential to reason. What interests reason is knowledge, not whatever knowledge considers itself to be. Reason's orientation leads the subject away from himself rather than reinforcing him in his ephemeral convictions. Only by a high-handed abstraction can opinion and reasoned insight be reduced to the commonality of a subjective appropriation of the contents of consciousness; rather this commonality, the subjective confiscation of the object, already is the transition to the false. In the kind of motivation underlying each individual proposition, no matter how erroneous it might be, the difference between opinion and reasoned insight emerges concretely. With admirable impartiality, unmarred even by his heavy-handed psychological tone, Arthur Schnitzler outlined this phenomenon a generation ago: "It is for the most part deliberate insincerity to equate the dogmas of the church with the dogmas of science, even where the latter are apparently dubious. What counts, already unjustly, as 'scientific dogma' in every case owes its stature to the honesty and exertion of thinkers and researchers and to confirmation by a thousand observations. The church dogma is in the best of cases the naive assertion of a visionary, the belief in which is often imposed upon thousands of people only through terrorism."<sup>d</sup> One could add that reason, if in fact it does not want to subscribe to a second dogmatism, must also reflect critically upon the concept of science that Schnitzler still somewhat naively assumes. Philosophy has its place in such reflection; while philosophy still relied on itself, its science was nothing other than the achievement of such self-reflection, and the renunciation of this self-reflection is itself a symptom of the regression to mere opinions.<sup>11</sup>

For in the meantime consciousness, weakened and ever more sub-

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<sup>d</sup> Arthur Schnitzler, "Bemerkungen: Aus dem Nachlaß," in *Die neue Rundschau* 73 (1962): 350.

servient to reality, is losing the ability to make the exertion of reflection required by a concept of truth that does not stand in abstract and reified contraposition to mere subjectivity but rather develops itself through critique, by means of the reciprocal mediation of subject and object. And so in the name of a truth that liquidates the concept of truth as a chimera, a vestige of mythology, the distinction between truth and opinion itself becomes ever more precarious. Of course, these considerations are not entertained by societal consciousness, which long ago took its leave from philosophical consciousness as though from a specialized department. Nevertheless, they are reflected in the procedures of scientific research, which have become the general model of knowledge in contradistinction to mere opinion. Hence their power. Processes that, if one may speak this way, take place within the philosophical concept, have their consequences for everyday consciousness, and especially in its social dimensions. Societal consciousness tacitly renounces a distinction between truth and opinion, a renunciation that does not leave the movement of spirit unaffected.<sup>12</sup> Frequently truth becomes opinion to the consciousness that is wise to the world, as with that journalist. But opinion replaces truth with itself. In place of the both problematical and binding idea of truth in itself there appears the more comfortable idea of truth for us, whether it be for everyone, or at least for many. "*Thirteen million Americans can't be wrong*,"\* goes a popular advertising slogan, a more faithful echo of the spirit of the age than the isolated pride of those who consider themselves the cultural elite would care to admit. The average opinion—along with the societal power concentrated in it—becomes a fetish, and the attributes of truth are displaced onto it. It is incomparably easier to detect its meagerness, to become outraged or amused by it, than to confront it cogently. Even the strange, presumptuous claims made by the latest form of the dissolution of the concept of truth in many—not all—directions of logical positivism spring to mind; at the same time they can be refuted on their own terrain only with great difficulty. For any refutation presupposes precisely the very relationships of thought to the subject matter, the very experience that is thrown on the scrap heap in the name of the transformation of thought into a method that should be as independent as possible from the subject matter. More in keeping with the times is good old *common sense*\* that, while priding itself on its own reasonableness, at the same time spitefully repudiates reason, knowing that what matters in the world is not thought so much as property and power, a hierarchy it would have no other way. What parades as the incorruptible skepticism of someone who will have no dust thrown in his eyes is the citizen shrugging his shoulders, "What in God's name could there be on the horizon," as is said at one place in Beckett's *Endgame*, the complacent

announcement of the subjective relativity of all knowledge.<sup>13</sup> It amounts to the view that stubborn and blind subjective self-interest is and should remain the measure of all things.

This may be studied, as though in a test tube, in the history of one of the most important concepts of social theory, that of ideology. In its full theoretical elaboration, the concept of ideology was related to a doctrine of society that claimed to be objective, inquired into the objective rules of societal change, and conceived a correct society, one in which objective reason would be realized and the illogicality of history, its blind contradictions, would be resolved. According to this theory, ideology signified a societally necessary false consciousness, that is, the antithesis to a true one, and was determinable only in this antithesis, but at the same time ideology could itself be derived from the objective societal laws, especially from the structure of the commodity form. Even in its untruth, as the expression of such necessity, ideology was also a fragment of truth. The later sociology of knowledge, particularly that of Pareto and Mannheim,<sup>14</sup> took some pride in its scientifically purified concepts and its enlightened, dogma-free viewpoint, when it replaced the older concept of ideology with one that—not by coincidence—was called ‘total ideology’ and that fit in only all too well with blind, total domination.<sup>e</sup> The theory holds that any consciousness is conditioned from the beginning by interests, that it is mere opinion. The idea of truth itself is attenuated into a perspective that is a composite of these opinions, vulnerable to the objection that it too is nothing but opinion: that of the free-floating intelligentsia. Such universal expansion empties the critical concept of ideology of its significance. Since, in honor of beloved truth, all truths are supposedly mere opinions, the idea of truth gives way to opinion. Society is no longer critically analyzed by theory, rather it is confirmed as that which it in fact is increasingly becoming: a chaos of undirected, accidental ideas and forces, the blindness of which drives the social totality toward its downfall. — The difficulty of accepting Nietzsche’s grandiose anticipation of the self-destruction of truth resulting from a process of enlightenment unreflectedly set loose can be observed in just such eccentricities as the attitude toward the pathological opinion par excellence: superstition. Kant, the Enlightenment philosopher of subjectivity in the name of objective truth, had unmasked superstition in his treatise against Swedenborg, “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer.”<sup>15</sup> Some empiricists, who indeed—in contrast to Kant—do not want to know anything about con-

<sup>e</sup> Cf. “Ideologie,” in Institut für Sozialforschung, *Soziologische Exkurse: Nach Vorträgen und Diskussionen* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1956), 162ff.

stitutive subjectivity yet in their reduction of the concept of truth embrace a very unconscious and therefore all the more uninhibited subjectivism, no longer stand so decidedly opposed to superstition. They would be inclined, even regarding superstition, to retreat to the neutrality of a scientific enterprise based on pure conceptless observation: even "occult facts" could be approached patiently, through observation, without prejudice. They relinquish the prerogative of rejecting the swindle out of hand—that what by its own definition exceeds the limits of the possibility of sensuous experience could then be made the object of such experience. They are still receptive to delusion. There is also a false impartiality, where thought is cut short and entrusts itself without reflection to the isolated materials under examination. Partiality and impartiality cannot be defined in the abstract at all; rather the distinction is drawn solely in the context of knowledge as well as of reality, the context in which the question itself is posed. In a science disposed to apologia indeed there are also those who calmly record even the pathological prejudices and dismiss their theoretical examination, their reduction to social and psychological defects, as itself biased, whereas in their opinion an impartial science can just as well develop a coordinate system in which—as with the late Marburg psychologist Jaensch—the *Authoritarian Personality* would be the positive character type and the potentially free people who resist it would be decadent weaklings.<sup>16</sup> From here it is but a short step to a scientific attitude that is indifferent to the concept of truth and contents itself with the production of more or less harmonious classificatory systems that elegantly ensnare whatever is observed.

The immanence of pathological opinion within so-called normal opinion is demonstrated graphically by the fact that, in crass contradiction to the official misrepresentation of a reasonable society of reasonable people, groundless and absurd ideas of every stripe are by no means the exception and are by no means on the wane. More than half the population of the Federal Republic of Germany believes that there is something to the astrology that in the early days of the bourgeois age, when the methods of scientific critique were less developed than they are today, Leibniz already characterized as the only science for which he felt nothing but contempt. Exactly how many people still believe racial theories that have been refuted innumerable times—for instance, the conviction that certain distinctive marks on the skull coincide with character traits—probably cannot be ascertained, if only because of the prevailing fear in the Federal Republic of the outcome of such surveys, which leads to the result that they are not even undertaken. The conviction that rationality is normality is false. Under the spell of the tenacious irrationality of the whole, the very irrationality of people is normal.<sup>17</sup> This irrationality and the instrumental reason of their practical activity

diverge widely, yet irrationality is constantly poised, ready in political attitudes to overflow even this instrumental reason. This touches upon one of the most serious of all difficulties encountered by the concept of public opinion in relation to private opinion. If public opinion legitimately exercises that control function that the theory of democratic society since Locke has attributed to it, then public opinion itself must be controllable in its truth. At present it is considered controllable only as the statistical mean value of the opinions of all individuals. In this mean value the irrationality of that opinion, its arbitrary and objectively gratuitous element, necessarily returns; therefore, it is precisely not that objective authority it claims to be according to its own concept, namely, a corrective to the fallible political actions of individuals. However, if instead of this one wanted to equate public opinion with what are called its organs, which are supposed to know and understand more, then the criterion of public opinion would be the very same control over the means of mass communication, the criticism of which is not the least important task of public opinion. To equate public opinion with the very stratum of society that considers itself the elite would be irresponsible, because in such a group the actual expertise, and hence the possibility of a judgment that is worth more than mere opinion, is indissolubly entangled within particular interests that elite perceives as though they were universal. The moment when an elite knows and declares itself as such, it already makes itself into the opposite of what it claims to be and draws irrational domination from circumstances that could grant it a good deal of rational insight. One may be an elite, for heaven's sake, but one should never feel like one. However, in view of such aporias, simply to delete the concept of public opinion, completely to renounce it, on the other hand would mean losing an element that can still avert the worst in an antagonistic society as long as it stays this side of totalitarian. The revision of the Dreyfus trial, even the fall of the minister of culture in Lower Saxony because of the opposition by Göttingen students, would have been impossible without public opinion.<sup>18</sup> Especially in the Western countries, even in the age of the administered world, public opinion has preserved some of the function it had in the struggle against absolutism. Indeed in Germany, where public opinion never really developed into the voice, however problematical, of an independent bourgeoisie, even now, when for the first time public opinion seems to be stirring more forcefully, it retains something of its old impotence.<sup>19</sup>

The characteristic form of absurd opinion today is nationalism.<sup>f</sup> With new virulence it infects the entire world, in a historical period where,

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<sup>f</sup> Cf. "The Meaning of Working Through the Past."

because of the state of the technical forces of production and the potential definition of the earth as a single planet, at least in the non-underdeveloped countries nationalism has lost its real basis and has become the full-blown ideology it always has been. In private life, self-praise and anything resembling it is suspect, because such expressions reveal all too much the predominance of narcissism. The more individuals are caught up in themselves and the more fatally they pursue particular interests—interests that are reflected in that narcissistic attitude, which in turn reinforces the rigid power of the interests—the more carefully this very principle must be concealed and misrepresented, so that, as the National Socialist slogan has it, “service before self.”<sup>20</sup> However, it is precisely this force of taboo on individual narcissism, its repression, that gives nationalism its pernicious power. The life of the collective has different ground rules than those at work in the relations between individuals. In every soccer match the local fans, flouting the rules of hospitality, shamelessly cheer on their own team; Anatole France, today so prone to being treated *en canaille*—and not without some justification—remarked in *Penguin Island* that each fatherland stands above all others in the world.<sup>21</sup> People would only need take the norms of bourgeois private life to heart and raise them to the level of society. But well-meaning recommendations in this vein overlook the fact that any transition of this kind is impossible under conditions that impose such privations on individuals, so constantly disappoint their individual narcissism, in reality damn them to such helplessness, that they are condemned to collective narcissism. As a compensation, collective narcissism then restores to them as individuals some of the self-esteem the same collective strips from them and that they hope to fully recover through their delusive identification with it. More than any other pathological prejudice, the belief in the nation is opinion as dire fate: the hypostasis of the group to which one just happens to belong, the place where one just happens to be, into an absolute good and superiority. It inflates into a moral maxim that abominable wisdom born of emergency situations, that we are all in the same boat. It is just as ideological to distinguish healthy national sentiment from pathological nationalism as it is to believe in normal opinion in contrast to pathogenic opinion. The dynamic that leads from the supposedly healthy national sentiment into its overvalued excess is unstoppable, because its untruth is rooted in the person’s act of identifying himself with the irrational nexus of nature and society in which he by chance finds himself.

In view of all this we are left with the dictum of Hegel, who already perceived the contradiction at the heart of the concept of public opinion before it could fully unfold in reality: according to him, public opinion is to be both respected and disdained. This paradox stems not from the



wavering indecisiveness of those who must reflect on opinion but rather is immediately at one with the contradiction of reality toward which opinion is intended and from which opinion is produced. There is no freedom without an opinion that diverges from reality, but such divergence endangers freedom. The idea of the free expression of opinion, which indeed cannot be separated from the idea of a free society, necessarily becomes the right to propose, defend, and if possible successfully champion one's own opinion, even when it is false, mad, disastrous. Yet if for that reason one wanted to curb the right of free expression, then one would be heading explicitly for the kind of tyranny that lies implicitly within the logic of opinion itself. The antagonism within the concept of free expression boils down to the fact that the concept posits society as composed of free, equal, and emancipated people, whereas society's actual organization hinders all of that and produces and reproduces a condition of permanent regression among its subjects. The right to freely express one's opinion presumes an identity of the individual and his consciousness with the rational general interest, an identity that is hindered in the very world in which it is formally viewed as a given.

Nowadays it is altogether problematical to oppose mere opinion in the name of truth, because a fatal elective affinity has been established between the former and reality, which in turn proves useful to the stubborn rigidity of opinion. Certainly the opinion of the fool who moves her bed around her bedroom in order to shield herself from the danger of evil rays is pathogenic. But the risk of exposure in a radioactively contaminated world has grown so great that the anxiety is belatedly honored by the same faculty of reason that eschews its psychotic character. The objective world is approaching the image persecution mania renders of it. The concept of persecution mania and pathological opinion as a whole are not spared the same tendency. Anyone who nowadays hopes to comprehend the pathogenic element of reality with the traditional categories of human understanding falls into the same irrationality he imagines himself to be protected from by his loyal adherence to healthy common sense.

One may risk the general definition that pathological opinion is hardened opinion, reified consciousness, the damaged capacity for full experience.<sup>22</sup> The identification of *doxa* with mere subjective reason, repeated many times since the Platonic critique of the Sophists, identifies only one aspect. Opinion, and certainly the pathological kind, is always also a lack of subjectivity and allies itself with this weakness. This is clearly inscribed in the Platonic caricatures of the swaggering adversaries of Socrates. When the subject no longer has the strength of rational synthesis, or desperately denies it in the face of overwhelming power, then opin-

ion settles in. And usually subjectivism does not count for much here; rather subjectivism is used almost automatically as an excuse by a consciousness that is precisely not the self-consciousness knowledge needs in order to become objective. What the subject, in the name of opinion, takes for his personal prerogative is in every respect merely the reproduction of the objective relations in which he is entangled. The supposed opinion of the individual repeats the congealed opinion of everyone. To the subject, who has no genuine relation to the matter at hand, who recoils from its otherness and coldness, everything he says about it, both for the subject and in itself, becomes mere opinion, something that is reproduced and registered and could just as easily be otherwise. The subjectivistic reduction to the contingency of individual consciousness submits itself perfectly to a servile respect for an objectivity that lets such a consciousness stand unchallenged and to which that consciousness still shows reverence in the assurance that whatever it thinks is not binding in view of the force of this objectivity: by its standard, reason is nothing at all. The contingent nature of opinion reflects the rift between the object and reason. The subject honors the elemental powers by degrading himself into his own contingency. For this reason the condition of pathological opinion can hardly be changed by mere consciousness. The reification of the consciousness that deserts and defects to the world of things, capitulates before that world and makes itself resemble it, the desperate conformity of the person who is unable to withstand the coldness and predominance of the world, except by outdoing it if possible, is grounded in the world that is reified, divested of the immediacy of human relations, dominated by the abstract principle of exchange. If there really is no correct life in the false life, then actually there can be no correct consciousness in it either.<sup>23</sup> False opinion cannot be transcended through intellectual rectification alone but only concretely. A consciousness that here and now would completely renounce this hardening of opinion, which constitutes the pathological principle, would be just as problematic as the hardening itself. It would fall victim to the fleeting and unstructured alternation of ideas, that mollusk-like monstrosity that can be observed in many so-called sensitive people and that has not even attained the synthesis of rational insight that then freezes solid in reified consciousness. Such a, so to speak, paradisiacal consciousness would be a priori unequal to the reality it must come to know and which is the hardness itself. Every instruction for attaining correct consciousness would be in vain. In reality consciousness consists solely in the exertion of reflecting unceasingly upon itself and its aporias.

The *Anglo-Saxon* form of the problem of opinion is the watering down of truth by skepticism. The objective knowledge of reality, and

hence the question of how it is fashioned, is reduced to the epistemological subjects, and thus to the way in which their interests, not being reconciled in any objective general concept, should according to the doctrine of liberalism blindly reproduce the whole that at the same time they nonetheless continually threaten to tear apart. The latent, self-concealed subjectivism within the objective-scientific mentality of the Anglo-Saxon cultural milieu coincides with the distrust of unbridled subjectivity and with the constant, already automatic, tendency to relativize knowledge by referring to its conditionedness in the epistemological subject. Strong affects defend consciousness from being reminded of its own subjectivism, from the fact that the position that one takes has no other source of legitimacy than what in the final analysis is immediately given to mere individuals, and hence ultimately, merely opinion. — The *German* temptation, if not that of all peoples who live east of the Mediterranean cultural sphere and were never fully Latinized, is the inviolate hardening of the idea of objective truth, which is thereby made into something that is no less subjective than opinion. The capitulation before facts not permeated by thought and the adaptation of thought to given reality in the West corresponds in Germany to the lack of self-reflection, the inexorability of megalomania. Both forms of consciousness, the one that bows before the facts and the other that mistakes itself for an overlord or creator of facts, are like the shattered halves of the truth that was not fulfilled in the world and the failure of which also affects thought. The truth cannot be patched together from its pieces. In effect those pieces get along with each other fairly well:<sup>24</sup> anyone who, in seeking out his spot in the world along with everyone else, leaves the world as it is, confirms it as the true reality, precisely as the law the world is and the imperious mind imagines itself to be. Traditional German metaphysics, and the spirit that produced it and in which it lives on, latches onto the truth and tendentiously counterfeits it into an arbitrary opinion, an eternal *pars pro toto*. Positivism sabotages truth by reducing it to so-called mere opinion and, because nothing remains for it but opinion, sides with it. In both cases nothing helps but the unwavering exertion of critique. Truth has no place other than the will to resist the lie of opinion.<sup>25</sup>

Thought, and probably not just contemporary thought, proves itself in the liquidation of opinion: literally the dominant opinion. This opinion is not due simply to people's inadequate knowledge but rather is imposed upon them by the overall structure of society and hence by relations of domination. How widespread these relations are provides an initial index of falsity: it shows how far the control of thought through domination extends. Its signature is banality. The belief that the banal is something

self-evident and hence unproblematic and that levels of more sophisticated differentiation rise above it is itself a part of opinion that must be liquidated. The banal cannot be true. Whatever is universally accepted by people living under false social conditions already contains ideological monstrosity prior to any particular content, because it reinforces the belief that these conditions are supposedly their own. A crust of reified opinions, banality shields the status quo and its law. To defend oneself against it is not yet the truth and may easily enough deteriorate into abstract negation, but it is the agent of the process without which there is no truth. The force of thought, however, is measured by the extent to which, in its effort to liquidate opinion, thought does not gratify itself all too easily by sharpening only its outward edge. It should resist as well the opinion within itself: namely, the momentarily prevailing position or tendency, and that, in the stage of total societalization, also includes anyone who passionately struggles against it. Societalization constitutes within thought this element of opinion thought must reflect about, whose limitedness it must explode. Everything within thought that repeats a position without reflecting upon it, like those who from the very beginning share an author's opinion, is bad. In this attitude thought is brought to a standstill, degraded into the mere recital of what is accepted, and becomes untrue. For the thought expresses something it has not permeated yet as though it had reached its own conclusion. There is no thought in which the remnants of opinion do not inhere. They are at once both necessary and extrinsic to it. It is the nature of thought to remain loyal to itself by negating itself in these moments. That is the critical form of thought. Critical thought alone, not thought's complacent agreement with itself, may help bring about change.