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Words, Actions and Images for Shaping Public Opinion

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**SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION
from the Sahara to the Caucasus
(16th – 21st Centuries)**

**Introduction :
Words, Actions and Images for Shaping Public Opinion**

Randi Deguilhem and H el ene Claudot-Hawad

If communicational tools provide agential means for shaping public opinion, then it follows that the link between the two is neither culture-specific nor is it intrinsically linked to a particular political system. Nonetheless, the extent and nature of the instruments which mediate the process of transmitting information, receiving it and then interpreting it are intimately connected with the technicity of communicational tools that evolve over time and differ among societies. Socioeconomic levels and cultural preferences likewise exert determining factors with regard to the availability or the choice of communicational methods as a way of influencing opinion. On the level of the individual, prominent personalities who represent social clusters as well as lesser-known persons use different channels of communication to act as catalysts and trend setters of opinion. Yet, whatever the character or technical sophistication of the communicational tool and its impact zones within a given community, it is irrefutable that communicational vectors linked to public opinion are constitutive components of human society before the advent of the modern era with its plethora of written, oral, visual and electronic systems and networks¹.

Engaging with research that has defined the booming field of communication studies and public opinion with particular attention given to analyses which link the appearance of

¹ Brugidou 2008.

public opinion with the emergence of a Western-style modern democratic system², the work published in this issue of *Archiv Orientalni* goes beyond these traditional paradigms. Deliberately focusing on a wide area in the larger Mediterranean space and beyond, ranging over three continents, touching regions from the Sahara to the Caucasus and Russia via the Middle East, and adopting an approach with case studies running from the 16th to the 21st centuries, the fifteen scholars who have authored the contributions in this issue extend and push the debate on public opinion into new geographical, chronological and epistemological domains.

In keeping with this large vision of the question with respect to the culturally diverse and widespread region as well as the long period under study in these contributions which begins with the pre-modern European fascination with the Holy Land and ends with an analysis of U.S. Muslim public opinion polls regarding the September 11 attacks, the papers presented here underline several dimensions in the relationship between communicational tools and public opinion, bringing to the fore, both the elasticity in this link and the importance of societal networks as well as questions related to gender. The aim of studying widely varied situations consequently allows the authors to reflect upon the larger notion of public opinion in terms of the formulation of a message and its content, the channels chosen to transmit it, the targeted audience and the impact of that message ranging from a scholarly and intellectual environment (for example, within the medical milieu in late Ottoman Palestine) to a more popular situation (local dance in Cairo as public art and thus, a way of influencing public opinion). Rather than searching for a common denominator to define public opinion as something which develops in a linear manner within the modern democratic political system, the research published here reveals that, on the contrary, a large diversity of communicational channels (written, oral, electronic, visual, corporal) were used over the last five centuries in the regions under study (Mattelart 1997 for related questions in terms of Europe) with the express purpose of eliciting and shaping opinion within urban, rural and nomadic societies that were organized according to very different political configurations over the centuries.

I Imagining the Other: Fashioning Opinion

The first set of contributions analyses the concept of Otherness within the general

² For example: d'Almeida 2009; Wolton 1996; Habermas 1978, *ibid.*, 1989.

epistemological framework regarding public opinion as presented in the above paragraphs. In this first section, the six studies focus on the impact of words, images and corporal language as they are projected on to the image of the Other in a specific time and place. These studies examine and question the validity of the binary schema where the Other is constructed in direct relation to the Self in view of the fact that boundaries between these two categories, Other and Self, are, in reality, fluid and inversed reflections of each other as they are constructed and reconfigured with respect to specific historical contexts. As these contributions show, the constructed image of the Other reveals more about the persons and social groups which create that image and the discourse around it rather than about the individuals or the culture which is being publicized. To put it otherwise, information transmitted to a given audience via different communicational forms holds an implicit or explicit aim is to shape public opinion about an imagined Other.

From this perspective, the section opens with Svetlana Kirillina's study on the sixteenth to eighteenth century Russian Holy Land pilgrimage literature which contributed to the formation of knowledge about the Middle East in Russia as a major source of information about the visited lands. From the sixteenth century forward, the scope of pilgrims' interest became wider and more versatile. Practically all Russian pilgrims who left written travel accounts concentrated not only on representations of the customary phenomena of pilgrimage but also paid tribute, albeit in various degrees, to secular motifs and issues. Pilgrims' writings were appealing to all strata of the Russian society as 'edifying reading' about the Holy Land but it also aimed at stirring readers' curiosity about the other world located outside the boundaries of their homeland. A precursor to travelogues, this pilgrimage literature, written by men belonging to different hierarchal levels of the Russian Orthodox clergy who successively visited the Near East and Egypt over a period of two centuries, created an influential vision in Russia about Christian communities living in the Arab-Ottoman world. This vision, which would later be characterized as an Orientalist perception of the Other, created a separate genre for this type of literature in Russia and beyond its borders.

In the second contribution in this section, Carter Findley discusses the roles of oral and written culture in the Ottoman Empire in relation to shaping public opinion. Observing the deep-rooted personalized relationship in the transmission of information from a learned individual to a trainee, whether in a religious context or another type of situation (i.e. musical training), the core of the knowledge is orally transmitted from "master" to "apprentice" even when written material is used in the process. This immediately brings to mind the importance

of the *ijāza* where the status of the teacher and his/her place in the link of knowledge is of paramount value in the relationship of learning.

From this standpoint and in the interrelated context of the discourse on colonialism, local elites and subaltern relationships produced within colonized regions as interpreted by Partha Chatterjee as well as in relation to the notion of imagined communities as developed by Benedict Anderson, Carter Findley examines two competing currents which strive to explain the way by which the Turks in the Ottoman Empire became “Turkish, Muslim and modern” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the words of Carter Findley, the triangular configuration of “Turkish, Muslim and modern” is crucial towards understanding the narrative of modern Turkey, the interpretation of its past (Ottoman becomes Turkish, religion is a national identifier as the country attains a status of being modern) and the national historiography of the country as constructed by such thinkers. The element concerning public opinion is pertinent here in the sense that these identifying markers in the triangulation mentioned above do not equally affect all Ottomans, and then Turks, in that socio-economic status or cultural preferences often denotes one’s access or predilection towards receiving information via either oral or written sources. This is, in fact, often a determinant in shaping public opinion.

Imagining modernity within the context of the debate concerning the compelled or induced use of a colonial language and its accompanying civilizational values constitutes the core of the study presented by Yoshiko Sugiyama. In relation to the impact of this debate on public opinion within the local population of French-protectorate Tunisia, she analyzes the aims of the educational modernizing project conceptualized and realized by the French colonial authorities and a group of Muslim Tunis reformers. Concentrating her study on the Khaldûniyya, the educative-cultural counterpart to the Islamic Zaytûna school of higher learning in Tunis, as well as focusing on the question of language politics within the framework of the French-Arab schools in Tunisia and the restructured Tunisian elementary schools – the *kuttâb* – where the use of French was factored into the curriculum, Yoshiko Sugiyama analyzes the role of language within a colonial context and its impact on the students’ and the teachers’ identity. Her studies of the three types of educational structures mentioned above highlight the politicization of the Arabic language as an instrument of national identity and politico-cultural resistance within the colonial setting of Tunisia under the Protectorate; the reaction of the Tunisian public to this debate is also an integral part of this contribution. Her study also draws attention to the fact that the political use of the Arabic

language as an emblematic element of identity results in a homogenizing effect where linguistic, cultural, social and religious diversity are gradually removed from the language in the process of imagining the Other and fashioning opinion.

In her study on female Oriental dancers in Cairo and their impact on the way that contemporary Egyptians as well as foreigners, especially Europeans and Americans, form their opinions about the female body in the Arab world, Julie Boukobza focuses her attention on the organized interaction between a professional group of Egyptian “folk” dancers in Cairo and foreign apprentices who travel to Egypt to learn this type of dancing. Coordinated on both the local and international scale, these interactions take the form of workshops or other events where Oriental dancers transmit their corporal movements and gestures to the apprentices. This type of interaction which has been increasingly organized since the end of the twentieth century constitutes a new and savvy cultural industry in Cairo. By concentrating on specific encounters between foreign apprentices and these Oriental dancers, Julie Boukobza interprets these interactions on several levels. Whereas most of the foreigner apprentices arrive in Cairo with a preconceived mindset about the Oriental female body, following the analysis proposed by Edward Said, their on-site training in Cairo in Oriental dance techniques and culture may allow them to evolve beyond the stereotyped “belly-dance” interpretation towards a larger understanding of the civilizational traditions represented in this type of art. As for the Cairene dancers, their interaction with foreign apprentices influences their own understanding of their professional practices, impacting their perception of their art, i.e. via the foreign apprentices who accept certain dance movements but reject others. In other words, the impact on the opinion of the Other is reciprocal through physical and visual contact.

Within the context of analyzing the means by which opinion is fashioned by imagining the Other, Mathieu Jeanne’s research concentrates on a different part of the African continent, the Saharo-Sahelian region, particularly, in Niger. Focusing on the modern definition of slavery as it is understood in terms of Western raciological classifications of the nineteenth century transposed onto other situations and cultures, Mathieu Jeanne studies the impact of these classifications in the Saharo-Sahel as they are interpreted by local persons trained in the United States. He analyses their raciological re-reading, in black and white, of conditions qualified as slavery according to these Western grids of evaluation. Relinquishing an interpretation of this phenomenon as understood through a prism based on local categories, the author examines how these local persons trained in the U.S. worked within a framework which sought to oppose claims and arguments put forth in the 1990s by armed groups of

Touaregs and Maures. From this point of view, Mathieu Jeanne analyses the Timidria Association which thus created this public enemy by diabolizing the Touaregs and Maures by stigmatizing and associating certain practices among them with the savagery of the “Other”, especially, in terms of skin color. The author reminds us that this type of operation yields important financial and political benefits for the Timidria Association but also for others similar to it, notably, via in relation to their connection with international opinion.

Staying within the realm of contemporary interpretations regarding opinions constructed in relation to the Other, i.e. the socio-political construction of an emblematic Other whose origins lie in a culture other than the prevailing one, Julien Gaertner contributes the final study in this first section. Working from a large empirical base of nearly all the fictional films produced in France where “Arabs” play a role in the film, from the independence of Algeria in 1962 up to the present day, the author examines the construction and reconstruction of the image of the “Arab”, male and female, in French public opinion via fictional films. Going beyond the prism of Orientalism as proposed by Said as too simplest and reductionist, Julien Gaertner proposes instead an analysis, which is not always chronologically linear, of the vision of French filmmakers towards the place of Arabs in French society during the last 60 years. His study reveals that the filmmakers, via comedy and tragedy, illustrate and participate in the creation of public opinion by their use of different and changing typologies of “Arabs” in French society. Ranging across the entire socioeconomic spectrum from actors incarnating characters in the lower socioeconomic echelons or in the underworld to depictions of figures such as lawyers, architects, doctors, these images are invariably connected to domestic and international circumstances.

II Emblematic Figures Impacting Opinion

The second section of this publication continues with the idea that the shaping of public opinion is structured within the context and movements of society in all their dimensions. The five contributions in this section focus on individuals who personified pioneering opinions within their respective societies. Despite the diversity of the different circumstances and regions analyzed in these contributions, the emblematic figures, studied here, who directly impacted public opinion through their conceptualization and promotion of innovative ideas share certain characteristics. They all sought ways of resisting dominant powers or ideas within their communities, whether linked to the imperial or local situations, or connected with traditional gender organization of society.

Impacting opinion in social, political and cultural spheres, these shapers of public opinion, who pushed through alternative opinions in their societies, were inspired by republican principles as characterized by the modern state and as opposed to the structure of Empire. In doing so, especially given that the figures studied here belonged to newly-created social or cultural minorities, and taking into account the context of gender-defined relations within new political configurations (i.e. the Mandate structure), the ideas of these individuals collided with certain ethno-cultural concepts found in the paradigm of the modern Nation. This dilemma is characterized by a clash between the “universal” principles of human rights with actual demands and practices on-the-ground which insist upon an implementation of these rights. As the contributions reveal, this clash between principles and practice often emerges in light of the fact that these principles, claimed by their proponents to be universal, are, in reality, frequently applied to predefined groups within society according to national, regional, communitarian or gendered definitions.

Focusing on the Syro-Lebanese intellectual and activist Marie Ajami (1888-1965), Sabine Saliba analyses the impact on society of this early twentieth-century opinion-maker. The first woman to establish a long-lived and influential newspaper (*al-'Arûs*) in late Ottoman Damascus and, indeed, in all of Syria, Marie Ajami played a leading role among intellectuals in this part of the Ottoman lands and then during the French Mandate (Dupont and Mayeur-Jaouen 2002) but also within the larger society. Along with a large number of newspapers established contemporaneously with Ajami's, some of them ephemeral with only a few short issues while others continued to print over several decades, Marie Ajami's foundation of *'al-Arûs* illustrates an important example of an intellectual *cum* opinion-maker who intervenes in the larger society around her by means of providing media space for debate. In articles published in *'al-Arûs* but also in other newspapers as well as different tribunes such as in the context of political-cultural gatherings and club meetings in Damascus and Beirut, she strongly impacts opinion, advocating for a much more visible and public role for women both in her own society and in society in general. She also brings her strong voice into the fight against the Ottoman and then the French occupant of Syria.

Several thousands of kilometers away from Syro-Lebanese activism but in a comparable situation following a military and political conquest led by colonial powers, in this case – French and Ottoman then Turkish, Italian and British – the Touareg revolutionary nobleman Kawsen (c. 1880-1919) reorganized an anti-colonial resistance movement in the Sahara which resulted in a general uprising by the Touaregs in 1916. In her study, H el ene Claudot-Hawad underlines one of the original aspects of this resistance, namely, the innovative means of

communication used by Kawsen via new communicational tactics and means of persuasion to shape Touareg opinion in three different contexts: 1- the period of the first exile (1899-1916), 2- that of the war carried out in Touareg territory (1916-1918) and 3- that of the last exile (1918-1919). The targeted area is immense: it is a vast desert region of several thousand square kilometers where the written press, radio and other means of mass transmission of information do not exist yet. Nonetheless, the mobility of nomads living in that space assures a rapid and efficient means for the circulation of news. In this context, with the aim of transmitting his political message and turning Tuareg opinion in his favor, Kawsen brings into play both oral and written methods – depending on his audience – by making use of maxims, aphorisms and poetry, all the while, evoking Tuareg identity markers through eye-catching actions via choice of clothing, extravagant and infringing societal acts, the introduction of new objects or new uses of old objects, specific behavioral styles, etc. All this emphasizes that Kawsen's tactics and strategies correspond to a new societal project which redefines Tuareg principles founded on warrior values, relations between groups and individuals involving protection, the disparity of social roles and other. Kawsen's revolution and his project implies a reorganization of Tuareg society, founded on new relations between honor, morale and politics: such a project was difficult to accept within most of Tuareg society and, as Kawsen had predicted, important means of persuasion would be needed for it to establish itself enduringly within Tuareg culture.

For his part, Mikhail Meyer examines the case of Abdurrashid Ibrahim (1857-1944) who, although well integrated within the Russian political elites, connects strongly nonetheless with his Tartar identity. Indeed, Abdurrashid Ibrahim introduces a Muslim perspective into Russian public opinion through his participation in Central Asian Islamic movements which sought to free Central Asia from colonial pressures as well as from national power structures. His activism for the pan-Islamic project closely links Abdurrashid Ibrahim with political movements both inside and outside Russia where his influence had an impact on public opinion. Furthermore, along with numerous liberal and radical Russians, Abdurrashid Ibrahim associates with Japanophilia which developed in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Staying within the larger Russian sphere of influence, Dimitry R. Zhantiev studies the trajectory and the influence of the northern Caucasian nobleman Bekir Sami-bey Kundukh (1865-1933). Originating from a region which was integrated into the Russian and then the Ottoman Empire, Sami-bey was one of the earliest supporters of Mustafa Kemal. However, as the latter increasingly pushed forward a Turkic agenda, Sami-bey turned towards advocating

an independent state in the northern Caucasus. In reality, Sami-bey was torn between the outdated values of an Empire whose pluri-ethnic character included the Caucasian identity and the new values of the Turkish modern state, to which he basically adhered, but the Turkish nationalist component which excluded other identities presented inflexible obstacle for him.

In the final contribution of this section, Goetz Nordbruch delves into the writings of Ra'if Khuri (1913-1967), a Marxist Lebanese intellectual and activist, who advocated a central place in society for individual rights and liberties. An opinion-maker on several levels, Ra'if Khuri's criticism of colonial politics and Zionism was accompanied by an intransigent stance against European fascism and Nazism: he wrote articles against the persecution of the Jews and political repression in Germany. Making the link between the two, Ra'if Khuri underlined the influence of fascist and social-national thought on the emerging national political parties in the Middle East as he critiqued the ethno-cultural concept of the "Arab" nation. His rejection of the existence of an "authentic" Arab-Islamic tradition went against the prevailing conventional wisdom put forth by the nationalists and early Islamic movements in this context.

III Moving Opinion through the Media

The authors in the third and final section of this publication focus their inquiry on the media as a vector for shaping public opinion in targeted groups in society and within the larger population. This is a topic which has been abundantly studied for Europe and, more generally, as far concerns media influence and public opinion in the West in terms of individuals and groups using the media to intervene and transmit information to create, shape and change public opinion. In France, Dominique Wolton, along with his associates, has led a major part of the research on this topic (Wolton 1997) to the point where he has created a veritable school on the study of communication and public opinion, strongly influencing and structuring the debate.

On the other hand, despite the fact that the media has also played an extremely important role in molding public opinion in the Middle East and North Africa for the last 150 years and despite a few excellent publications on the topic (Rugh 1979; *Ibid.*, 2004, in particular for what he calls the fast news media – the daily newspapers, radio and television) especially concerning the influence of the media on public opinion as related to the political process, much less academic attention has focused on this type of study for this region of the

world. Yet, the empirical material is abundant, significant numbers of newspapers published in the Middle East and North Africa from the late nineteenth century to the present are available in research centers in the region and more and more are now accessible on line, not to speak of the proliferation of Middle Eastern internet sites. The power of the word and the image in the public space in this region is incontestable. This section of the publication highlights several different types of media in the Middle East which acted as a conduit to enter the public debate: newspapers from the end of the Ottoman period in Palestine, television media and public opinion polls.

This third section opens with Philippe Bourmaud's contribution which studies the extent and type of impact that physicians had on the public debate in Palestine during the late Ottoman period via their public conferences and newspaper articles. Recognized by the general public not only as authorities in the specific domain of medicine but also as persons who claimed a more general competence in matters well beyond their profession, these physicians exercised agency in diverse spheres of society but also as intermediaries between their patients and government administration in Palestine.

As the public debate moved away from issues related to reforms in society connected with the Tanzimat, a debate which allowed the physicians to situate themselves in society, through their newspaper articles, published in the local press, as experts versed in issues concerning public interest, towards one regarding questions of nationality within the context of Jewish immigration and settling in Palestine, the physicians found themselves on an altogether different type of terrain in the last years of the Ottoman period, one which was projected through the newspaper articles that they published and via their public speeches.

Turning towards the issue regarding the question of the perceived reception of messages sent out by media towards theoretically targeted audiences, the contribution jointly penned by Baudouin Dupret and Jean-Noël Ferrié attempts to grasp aspects of this admittedly difficult side of the public opinion debate in relation to three television channels transmitting in Arabic: *al-Jazeera*, *al-Manar* and *al-Hurra*. In order to approach this question of the means by which one may analyze the reception of information and messages within a debate on public opinion, the two authors begin by discussing the general impact of these three stations in the Arab world.

This is an important element in itself in view of the fact that prior to the creation of these channels, information in Arabic was disseminated in the Arab world exclusively through national television channels firmly controlled by their respective governments. On the

other hand, these three channels, *al-Jazeera*, *al-Manar* and *al-Hurra*, picked up by the satellite “Arabsat”, are also controlled – not by governments – but by their financial backers aiming to broadcast and project information which reflects the profile of these backers and the channels themselves. This projection of “self” is studied here by the two authors in relation to an analysis of three advertising spots transmitted by *al-Jazeera*, *al-Manar* and *al-Hurra* during the month of April 2004 from the point of view of a would-be receiver of this advertising.

The last contribution in this publication analyzes an altogether different type of public opinion instrument. Going beyond the geographical confines delimited in this publication, namely, from the Sahara to the Caucasus, but remaining within a space concerning the larger Muslim world, Blandine Chelini-Pont studies the contents and uses of public opinion polls in the post 9/11 United States as concerns the opinions in the U.S. towards Muslims but also Muslim opinion in the United States. As a corollary to her observations regarding the use of opinion polls in assessing positions towards issues raised in those polls, Blandine Chelini-Pont questions the representation and the representivity of Muslims who are depicted in opinion polls as well as those who participate in them: such questions of representivity are, indeed, a problem endemic to all opinion polls. The author begins by noting the difficulty in assessing the present-day demography of Muslims in the United States (publications by Yvonne Haddad and other scholars conversant with the long-term history of Muslims in the U.S. bring important information in this regard), in terms of a population count of Muslims in the country but also the composition of that population: whether the person in question is U.S. born or an immigrant and, in the latter case, identifying the country of origin, the branch of Islam to which individuals belonged (Sunnite, Shiite, Alevi, etc.) and so on.

By situating the main part of her study in post 9/11, Blandine Chelini-Pont’s objective is to try to determine, via the opinion polls, the parameters which characterize the rise of the political visibility of Muslim communities in the U.S. in direct relation to the attacks of 9/11: a traumatic event both for Muslims and non-Muslims in the United States. Noting that public opinion has been inextricably altered on all sides in relation to these attacks and their aftermath, she examines the amalgams about “Muslims” which have been increasingly constructed as a consequence of 9/11. Prominent organizations such MPAC (Muslim Public Affairs Council), first created in 1986 as the Political Action Committee, play an increasingly influential role in transmitting information towards the general public as well as policy makers about Muslims in the United States. With the necessary caution taken into account, the author shows that public opinion polls do indeed reflect evolving attitudes towards

Muslims in the U.S. post 9/11 and also the growing visibility of Muslim communities in the country.

A Note On Transcription

In order to facilitate the reading of the contributions in this work, the authors have adopted a simplified system for the transcription of Arab, Berber and Turkish names and words into English and French. As a result, diacritical marks on consonants have not been indicated, however, they have been used for long vowels for Arabic. For Tuareg words and names (Tamajaght, Berber), the variations in terms of the international phonetic alphabet are the following: *sh, gh, kh*, for *ç, γ, x* and *e, é*, for *ə, e*.

The usual spelling found in standard dictionaries for non-European names and words has been used here.

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