

**Political Culture and the Presentation of a Political Self: A Study of the Public Sphere in the Spirit of Erving Goffman**



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## Political culture and the presentation of a political self

### *A study of the public sphere in the spirit of Erving Goffman*

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News is not my favorite show. Oliver North is not my favorite star. I don't know anything about the Iran-contra thing. You can't avoid hearing about it – the only reason I know anything at all is because I read the *National Enquirer* once. But I don't know anything about it.

In a survey, this grinning man's proud response to the question, "What do you think of the Iran-Contra affair?" would register as "don't know." He was apparently not unusual in his lack of knowledge; at the height of the scandal, in August 1987 when this question was asked, the issue had been front-page news for months, but 24 percent of those polled said they did not know which side the U.S. government was supporting in Nicaragua, and 20 percent said the United States was supporting the Nicaraguan government.<sup>1</sup> Nor was the Iran-Contra affair an unusually ignored issue: many Americans do not know basic facts about many important political issues.<sup>2</sup> What does such ignorance mean?

The substance of political life is public discussion; even if a person can experience feelings of political concern without having a language for giving those feelings socially recognizable meaning, the feelings do not matter if they remain only private. Studying how people actually talk about politics may provide one key to understanding why so many Americans polled express little faith in government,<sup>3</sup> while so few try to change it.

As sociolinguists insist, people "do things with words"<sup>4</sup> beyond the words' lexical definitions. One sociological truism is that speech only makes sense in a social context. Another is that the content of speech is inseparable from its form.<sup>5</sup> But these two simple ideas' implications for research on public life have rarely been explored. In the spirit of Erving Goffman, I tried an experiment based on these two ideas. This is a stu-

dy of how people think they are supposed to sound talking about political things in public.

The first idea is about the relations people are willing to display toward their own political opinions. Like Harold Garfinkel's work,<sup>6</sup> this study examines not just the "what," not just the content, of political opinions, but also the "how," focussing not just on the answers people would leave on a multiple-choice questionnaire, but also on the relationships people display towards those answers, on the things they "say" with their forms of speech.

The second idea is that the immediate context gives meaning to the words. To impose a heavily public "frame," as Goffman calls it, on the interviews, I used an odd method: people-on-the-street interviews. Armed with a big microphone, I told people, truthfully, that I would be using the interviews for a radio documentary.<sup>7</sup> In most public-opinion research, interviewers take the context for granted, so they can only guess what it was about the interview and interviewer that inspired certain responses. By telling people the interviews were for a radio documentary, I hoped to make it clear just what it was about the interview and the interviewer to which respondents were responding. This was an effort to explore a folk definition of "public." What is "public?" What is the purpose of speaking in "public?" What is an appropriate way to speak for the public record?

The people I interviewed displayed their relations to their opinions, using socially established codes to distinguish between statements that, on a questionnaire, would look identical. The display is a central aspect of their political opinion. It is a public dimension of their opinion, the aspect of their opinion that is reproduced in interaction and to which other people can respond.

I found it useful to divide the interviews into three broad categories. Some people, like the man whose favorite show is not the news, tried to sound witty and irreverent, as if they themselves, and not larger political issues, were the real referents of the discussion. Such people used their words as a wedge between themselves and the world of politics. They were more interested in showing distance between themselves and politics; in saving face as individuals; in absolving themselves of responsibility for what they saw as the absurdity and corruption of political life. They used various methods to exempt themselves from seriously discussing politics: some strongly and proudly asserted their

feelings of powerlessness, and eagerly exaggerated the depths of their ignorance, as if to make a virtue of them. Others spoke in violent, hyperbolic tones, joking, imitating cartoon characters' speech, always leaving open the possibility that they were not serious. I label those "Irreverent" speakers. A second type of speaker could not capitalize on ignorance in the same way the "irreverent" people could. These people could only say that they were unqualified to offer opinions; some tentatively offered clichés as earnest efforts at public speech. Those, I call "Intimidated" speakers. A third type of speaker was "Concerned," more eager to send a message than to sound clever or save face. Though the opinions this third type expressed were not always in favor of popular control of the government – some favored a high degree of government secrecy, for example – their method of speaking implied a belief that what they, as citizens, said mattered.

Interviewing arbitrarily selected strangers is certainly not standard sociology. At this early stage in this type of research, an arbitrary method is useful, though, because it is not clear even what type of sampling would yield a variety of speaking styles. Simply finding out how repetitive these styles are seems to be a discovery in itself. Using the presence of the media – in this case, the radio journalist – as a stand-in for the public sphere is not a problem-free idea either.

But the interesting difficulties I encountered in framing and interpreting the interviews raise important questions for more acceptable forms of public-opinion research as well. The typology of public stances I outline below is an effort to sort through some theoretical and methodological problems. It is a means toward clarifying some questions and raising others, and not an end in itself.

So, first I discuss here what is wrong with the conventional approaches, then describe the basis of an alternative approach, and then, after describing the results of an investigation using this approach, go on to clarify what questions this alternative raises.

How would social scientists typically treat the man cited above, whose favorite star is not Oliver North? Surveys and intimate open-ended interviews, the two methods usually brought to bear on political questions, both present problems for investigations into public self-presentation, usually ignoring both questions outlined above, both the context of political expression and the "how."

### Standard political research and the missing context

An assumption fueling political survey research is that the most democratic way to understand public opinion is to find out what each individual thinks in private and add all the private opinions together. As Pierre Bourdieu<sup>8</sup> and Robert Bellah et al.<sup>9</sup> quip, such research would more accurately be called private-opinion research.

Public-opinion research actively tries to bypass public displays. Ignoring them will not make them irrelevant. If irony is the form that the chuckling man's political speech takes in public, it is a basic element of his political position. The tone is a shorthand, stylized way of designating the issue's meaning and his relation to it. A central question for public-opinion research then, should be, "What political positions can people take in public?"

Depth interviews also tend to eliminate the notion of "public." Usually these open-ended interviews aim at unearthing the "real beliefs" hidden beneath the distraction of public posturing. In the fascinating classic, *Political Ideology: Why the Common Man Believes What He Does*,<sup>10</sup> Robert Lane interviewed fifteen men individually, in a context that Lane said was modelled after a psychotherapeutic session:

... I had the good fortune to take a course on the strategy and tactics of psychotherapy with John Dollard. Under his guidance, and after studying and observing psychotherapeutic methods, I was assigned a patient for whom I served as therapist.... [This experience] launched me upon this study of the political mind and that shaped the character of my conversations with these fifteen men.<sup>11</sup>

He was very eager not to interview the men in their own homes, where there might be distractions or eavesdroppers whose presence might prevent the men from saying what they really thought. His interviews were "in quiet professional surroundings, over coffee and if they wanted, cigars, relaxed and comfortable.... The tape recorder, concealed, and used by permission of the men, seemed to impose no obstacle to confidence."<sup>12</sup>

Still, the men engaged in a relationship with him. Although he tried to erase the effect of their status difference with the comfort and coffee, some of the men deferentially called him "professor."

Minister, confessor, inquisitor, potential employer, judge, therapist,

reporter: it does not take a Foucault to see that they all require a different kind of “subject” to interview. I tried to draw out common assumptions of what a public subject would sound like, not in “quiet professional surroundings,” but in busy and noisy ones, full of interruptions, usually with groups of co-workers, families, or friends.

This may not be the best way to evoke a public posture. Some people may assume “on-the-street” interviews are particularly shallow, flip, and witty, and have made a special effort to conform to that image.<sup>13</sup> But it is equally plausible to assume that a person given an opportunity to speak out about a serious and important political issue would try to use the interview as a means of advocating a political position.

The way most political theorists have defined public life, many American do not have one.<sup>14</sup> Public life, in theory, includes, among other things, discussion between equals,<sup>15</sup> or at least possibilities for challenging and redefining power relations.<sup>16</sup> The discussion should be explicitly aimed at the common good.<sup>17</sup> It is not just family and it is not just work.

However, Paolo Mancini and Daniel Hallin argue, the U.S. media have the impossible task of supplying the missing dialogue and challenges an active citizenry is supposed to provide.<sup>18</sup> Many people watch or read the news to reassure themselves that the public sphere remains far from their own lives.<sup>19</sup> So, if many people assume that public life happens in the media, then interviewing them for the news, as I did, is a good way to evoke public voices. It is certainly a good way to understand what people think the news is for. It also raises many other interesting questions about political displays.

### **Standard political research and flat performance**

Grinning merrily, the man whose favorite show is not the news presumed a common cultural understanding with the interviewer, knowing that I understood what he was implying.

Clifford Geertz illustrates a concept of culture with a story: one school-boy winked, another’s eyelid twitched, a third parodied the first boy’s wink, or made a failed attempt at parodying the first boy’s wink, after practicing the parody in front of a mirror. All five winks look like rapid contractions of an eyelid, but there are socially established codes for

distinguishing between them; “a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not ... in fact, exist ... ”<sup>20</sup>

A survey researcher would not be able to record the chuckling photographer’s ironic self-presentation, but would simply repeat the question, “What do you think about the Iran-Contra affair?” three times, or until the respondent attained the requisite degree of seriousness in his response. Most survey-research manuals note in passing that it is difficult to ignore respondents’ rebelliousness, cynicism, outrage, intimidation, equivocation, lies, shyness, hints, metaphors, bragging, hostility, sexual advances, and the other modes of conversation that “commonsense” assumes. Without appearing rude, maintaining a “serious but friendly” tone, a surveyor is to pretend not to have access to commonsense methods of deciphering the conversation, but to wait for the explicit response before filling in the dot.<sup>21</sup>

But the man whose favorite show is not the news never squarely addresses the issues a poll would have forced on him; he makes it clear that he does not consider those issues to be very important and that it would be a show of gullibility to admit to believing the spectacle. He treats the question as if it was about himself and his own wit, while the question was intended to refer to the principles of democracy, law, and government secrecy that most social scientists, journalists, and activists treated as the “real” issues in the affair. The larger political issue the man did address, implicitly, was about the spectacular nature of U.S. politics.

If everyone does not use identical methods, cultural “tools,”<sup>22</sup> or “vocabularies of motives”<sup>23</sup> for deciphering the questions, social scientists do not usually open up different groups’ tool kits. Instead, they force respondents to speak seriously, forcing respondents to use a tool the respondents do not usually use, do not know how to use, or object to using. Theorists often have assumed that cultural choices are simply driven by ultimate values, which they assume are held seriously. But, as Ann Swidler says, the “tools” may help shape values, and not just be a result of them. C. Wright Mills outlines a method for studying the forms of expression themselves, saying, “There is no way to plumb behind verbalization into an individual.... The only source for a terminology of motives is the vocabularies of motives actually and usually used by actors in specific situations.”<sup>24</sup>

The man who read about Oliver North only once, and in the *National Enquirer* at that, presents a parody of an opinion, giving a sharp twist to his political “wink” that went far beyond a bland “I don’t know.” Because relations, styles, and displays are difficult to quantify, survey analysts typically have to read motives back in, to reconstruct the private mental process the respondent “must have” undergone to reach an answer. It is like making enriched bread: taking the nutrients out and then putting a few others, not the original ones, back in.

Even by surveyors’ own standards, survey research has problems with language, context, and relationships: question wording<sup>25</sup> and order<sup>26</sup> and tone matter much more than they would if everyone were doing the same things with words. What look to the surveyor like two identical questions are often taken very differently by respondents.<sup>27</sup> People give different answers to abstract questions than they do to concrete questions that seem to illustrate those abstractions.<sup>28</sup> Many respondents feel compelled to agree with whatever the interviewer says, even if it contradicts something else with which the interviewee has also agreed.<sup>29</sup> At least five studies showed that many people are quite willing to express opinions on fictitious events, people, and policies like the “Wallonians” and the “Metallic Metals Act,”<sup>30</sup> and a huge portion answer poll questions after admitting that they know very little about the issue.<sup>31</sup>

Polls are not useless. They can find out what information people have about a topic – how to avoid contracting AIDS, who is the president, for example – or how people will vote in the electoral polls. These are important uses. Aside from that, polls can find out what people can say in a poll, which is in itself interesting, but should not be assumed to be the kind of “opinion” that can be mobilized.

In fact, there may be systematic relations between what people can say in poll and what they can say in other contexts, but this has not been explored. If public-opinion research is aimed at registering changes in opinions, no doubt part of what changes is precisely that relation: between what people would be willing to say in a poll and what they would be willing to say in another context. Meanwhile, partisans of causes shamelessly use the poll data they like, explain away what they do not like,<sup>32</sup> and skew their political efforts to correspond with the things people are able to say in polls.

Depth interviewers, on the other hand, usually intuitively grasp respondents’ meanings, but rarely make the “how” a central question; or



as Garfinkel puts it, they “use common sense knowledge of the society in exactly the ways that members use it when they must decide what people are really doing or really talking about.”<sup>33</sup> The open-minded Lane, for example, observed, somewhat in passing, that some of the men preferred lighthearted political discussion, with a “jokable fellow,” and observed a number of discursive “gambits” the men used to handle their political uncertainty. But more often, Lane managed to encourage the men to speak in a serious and straightforward manner. In fact, the ability to avoid less straightforward, more allusive displays is the measure of a good interviewer.

One exception to the depth interviewers’ usual pattern is Arlie Hochschild’s work on gender ideology.<sup>34</sup> Pushing away, embracing, ironically sidling up to prevailing gender images: these energetic gestures become part of what “being a women” means, in her view. Hochschild trains a political eye to the methods of self-presentation. Some recent media studies also avoid the depth interviewers’ common problem. These “reception studies” look at how audiences position themselves in relation to mass entertainment.<sup>35</sup>

Along with Hochschild, I, too, think that the “methods” are themselves political, and deserve analysis in their own right. Analyzing the methods of speaking means stepping back from what Garfinkel calls “shared agreements,” to analyze how members, including the interviewer, know what the speaker means.

### **A different approach to political opinion**

I conducted about one hundred interviews, most with groups of people, about the Iran-Contra affair in the summer of 1987, and a few others on the falling stock market and aid to the Nicaraguan contra rebels that fall. The first question was always,

I’m doing on-the-street interviews about the Iran-Contra affair [or stock market, or upcoming congressional vote on aid to the contras in Nicaragua]. What do you think about it?

After that, the interviews are dialogues ranging from 10 minutes to an hour. I also asked most interviewees what they did for a living. They were conducted at a run-down suburban mall, tourist venues in San Francisco such as cable car stops, a city square, and public transporta-

tion stops in small cities that are physically near to, but socially distant from San Francisco.

My method of interpretation involved paying special attention to how the other people present interpreted the speaker. Usually, we seemed to share enough culture to know when to laugh, when to sneer and chuckle, when to step back and let the speaker pontificate, when to make a serious argument and ask earnest questions. Second, I asked myself, "What could this person *not* say, with this display?" or "What would be a rude, silly or out of place question for me to ask, given the 'definition of the situation' this speaker is assuming?" Third, I asked myself what a basic question, or phrase, would be for the various speakers. As I outlined above, I discerned three general types of speakers, which I labeled "Irreverent," "Intimidated," and "Concerned."

### **Various public presentations of self**

#### *Irreverent speakers: Type 1: Cynical chic*<sup>36</sup>

Cynical chic speakers capitalize on ignorance and powerlessness, making them seem intentional, even exaggerating them. They strenuously, though sometimes with subtlety, assert that they do not care, that they have not been fooled into wasting their time on something they cannot influence, and cannot be held responsible for whatever happens. Perversely, by making lack of power or knowledge seem intentional, the chic cynic can gain an appearance of control.

Their key question is, as one tourist put it, "What's it gonna do for me?" This man's answer: "Nothing." "I get more joy out of chewing gum," said another. A chicano moving-van loader claimed not to have heard of the affair, though it became apparent later that he did know quite a bit about it. On lunch break with three co-workers in a city square, he said,

Truthfully, I live in a shack in South City. I don't think my opinion would go far. What's going on in the hearing? Nothing we can do about it – why should we watch it on tv? We ain't got no say so. It's hard enough for me to get up in time, play conga, and take work serious. What are you gonna do, come home from work and think about Oliver North? I don't even know who he is. Who is he?"

A co-worker, another cynical chic jokester, answered, "A short skinny

bald dude,” and a third chimed in, affecting a “dumb” sounding accent, “Got a blonde secretary, dunkin’ his donuts and shreddin’ his papers.”

The first man pretended to perk up at the news of the blonde. “Oh, does he?” he asked, as if to emphasize that the mere mention of her was more interesting than the whole gamut of political information. Proud of his lack of interest, he wanted it known that his ignorance was not his fault.

We hear them contradicting so much, we contradict ourselves, and that’s just what they want: keep us confused and not really knowing what’s happening. Otherwise, they couldn’t be doing the things they’re doing. Look at all that cash! They’re probably diving into their swimming pools while we’re sitting here waiting to go back to work.

Taking cues from each other, the movers make the whole issue a joke. The narrative also requires that there be no “good guys” in the show. “It’s your typical type scandal,” sneered one fashionable Californian. Wanting to make sure we know she has not been fooled, she relied on her cynical chic ethos to guide her: “The press, the lawyers, take advantage of a situation, and take advantage of anything they can get ahold of.” I asked, “Why?”

“Money,” she replied.

The common tone was irony. Irony can afford a safe distance from everything, not just news. It is difficult to imagine approaching some things in any other way. A state college student’s job was to stand in a city plaza handing out free samples of Gatorade. Nights, he made sure to mention, he went dancing in the trendy “South of Market” area, a place known for plastic palm trees, gay country-western bars, and people wearing clothes named after decades. As for politics, he proudly asserted with a broad grin, “I’m lazy. Politically brain damaged, and it’s my fault.”

There are many theories of irony, especially since the term “post-modern” has become fashionable. I think the best explanation of irony is that it allows an audience to feel distant and exempt while at the same time the audience keeps coming back for more, without mounting a systematic challenge.<sup>37</sup> Irony makes the audience’s relation to the show a focus of attention, a source of amusement, in itself. As literary theorist Northrop Frye said,

Cultivated people go to a melodrama to hiss the villain with an air of condescension: they are making a point of the fact that they cannot take his villainy seriously. We have here a type of irony which exactly corresponds to that of two other major arts of the ironic age: advertising and propaganda. These arts pretend to address themselves to a subliminal audience of cretins, an audience that may not exist, but which is assumed to be simple-minded enough to accept at their face value the statements made about the purity of soap or a government's motives.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than quipping snidely, another method of seeming in control of powerlessness is to make a strong argument proving one's powerlessness. One man said,

I am a firm believer in – I don't think that one vote makes a difference. If they wanted *this* guy to be president, regardless of how everybody voted, he would be. People might have a say in whether a stop sign goes on Fifth and Green, but I really don't think they have a say in higher political things.<sup>39</sup>

A key aspect of the cynical chic stance is that, while it gives the appearance and feeling of control, and in part may be an accurate assessment of powerlessness and ignorance, it leaves the government free to act without any popular restraint whatsoever; people can have the appearance of control without risking actually trying to take control. As many said in a number of ways: "They're gonna do whatever they're gonna do anyway, and you're only getting part of the facts, so what the hell." It is a very empirical approach, perhaps accurately observing the government's relation to citizens. Chic cynics never say "I have a dream."

### *Irreverent type II: Macho exaggerator*

This strategy involves shocking, saying the most outrageous and violent thing possible. Caricatures said half tongue-in-cheek allow the speaker to bypass the question of seriousness and avoid tying the problems to any real consequences. For all their bravado about not believing the government, media, or other officials, they are susceptible to the most simplistic of political messages. While cynical chic audiences may, as Frye said, "hiss the villain with an air of condescension ... making a point of the fact that they cannot take his villainy seriously," the macho exaggerators continue to circulate the simplistic images put out by the military, not exactly discrediting the images, just repeating them, half seriously.

It is a way of talking unique, among my respondents, to men, especially

young manual laborers and military recruits. A plaster spattered white construction worker standing with his co-workers responded to my initial questions this way: “The contras? I don’t know. They’re weird. They’re a bunch of commies.”

“The contras?” I queried, perhaps “giving away” my surprise with a squawk. He laughed, so I laughed, too.

“Well, there’s something wrong with them. If there wasn’t nothing wrong with them, they wouldn’t get pissed off that they took the money and shit.” He and his co-workers discussed who the contras were for a few more seconds, then he exclaimed.

The contras can do whatever they want. As for Iran, I would like to see them blown off the face of the earth. They got no right leading us around. We’re bigger than them! We’re better!” (Mocking “standing tall,” giving his voice an AM radio announcer’s punch) “We’re American!”<sup>40</sup> (pause, then chuckle).

I asked: “Are you serious?”

He said: “Dead serious. We should blow the shit out of them. Anti-aircraft-M16’s – Blam, Blam! But (pauses, then laughs), nothing I can do about it!”

This dialogue was not unusual. Many men brought in cartoon sound effects as part of their positions. A young interviewee who was considering joining the military explained why:

I’d fight the Russians, mow’em down fffftttt (suddenly shifting to a pretend “hick” accent, as if to say, “I’m not saying this, it’s somebody else, somebody lesser”) – wanna throw some hand grenades, they’d give me a rifle, I could be Rambo.”

I asked, “Why do you want to do that?”

Once again in that funny mock “hick” accent, he said: “See, cuz I’m American – gotta be patriotic.”

The point is, it was impossible to tell whether these speakers were serious or not: this young man also told me that his commission-seeking recruiter lied to him. “All government officials are liars,” he claimed. But then he went back to comic book images, this time of Nicaraguans,

jungle bunnies, black people with big hats – they live in grass huts and the Russians would give them guns and make them be communists. I heard communism is like being in jail, like if you’re not off the street by nine a jeep will come by with guns and they’ll start shooting at you.”

Calling Nicaragua “jungle bunnies with big hats” and talking like a “hick” may be a joke, but it may not be. The macho approach is not limited to xenophobic viewpoints, though. A young black factory worker told his girlfriend and me that “Someone should cut the cackle on Reagan’s neck. Shoot him.”

Like chic cynicism, this macho hyperbolic rhetoric makes the whole political question unreal. The other people listening to these men did not, for example, try to dissuade them from their ideas, or back them up either. The woman whose boyfriend wanted Reagan’s neck cut did not take the strutting seriously. Turning toward me, she said, “No, but seriously,” and then, once appropriately set apart from her unserious boyfriend, tried to outline a real position. The construction workers stood by politely snickering when their co-worker urged bombing Iran. By drawing attention to the speaker, this kind of speech also makes all assertions of selfless patriotism sound absurd, like jokes.

Macho hyperbole makes talking about politics easier, giving the speaker the appearance of certainty. One man began with great hesitancy to discuss the stock market crash, finishing his phrases apologetically with “I think,” and “well, anyway, that’s my opinion.” He wandered onto the topic of foreign policy, then to Iran. Suddenly, he paused, and with new found vigor and certainty, switched to a macho exaggerator’s stance: “I know! Get tough with them. *That’s* it! They should be severely punished for taking hostages, but they’ve never been.” His measured politeness and formality disappeared: “We keep kissing their backside all the time.”

The young military men I interviewed all spoke like this. Ensclosed in a “habitus” that says that politics does not have anything to do with regular people, but is just a blank screen on which to project an inflated masculinity, the reality of war is kept at bay.

Does this display “really” assume powerlessness, as I am suggesting? What if, instead of venting violent anger about Reagan or Iran, a man said such things about his wife, or about someone else he could realistically harm? Probably his friends would say, “He’s only kidding” or try to cool him out. They did not, probably because it was so obviously unnecessary. The benefit of this kind of speech is that the speaker never has to say whether it is a joke or not.

*Irreverent type III: The literary critic*

There are no references to right and wrong here, either: the literary critic analyzes the political performance disinterestedly, cuts through the political or moral content of the show and “penetrates” right to the esthetic core of the matter. Sitting in an armchair, observing, the literary critic does not pass judgement. Their key phrase is a passive, “It appears....”

In viewing politics as well as television fiction, many Americans look more at the formal exigencies of the show rather than at real life references. Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz found that Westerners are more apt to look at “Dallas” as an artistic construction rather than a depiction of “real life.”<sup>41</sup> Americans, for example, will comment on the form of the show – how the episode will end, how a character cannot really have died because all the actors have to be employed next week. Americans watching “Dallas” pretend to be “behind the scenes,” unfooled by the spectacle, shrewdly calling the characters by their “real” (stage) names, rather than the names of the characters they play, as if the smooth, glamorous names adopted by stars are not also part of a theatrical image. They pretend to second-guess the writers’ plans. On their toes, they always try to peer behind the artifice to the reality behind it. As in politics, though, television viewers’ attempts to extricate themselves from the fiction of “Dallas” does not lead them *out* of the world of the flickering screen. Instead, it firmly embeds these behind-the-scenes critics between the pages of *People Magazine*.

Similarly, the literary critics sit with the audience but observe the audience’s reactions abstractly, claiming to be not actually feeling the same feelings they attribute to the audience. Thus, a legal secretary pronounced, “It is interesting to see what aspects of the story get more attention. It hadn’t been live on national networks until Ms. Hall had her say.... If anything short of a court marshal happens (to North) he’ll be viewed as some sort of hero.”

Instead of getting involved herself in admiring Hall’s or North’s looks, or arduously scraping away the glitter to glimpse the grim reality behind the show’s scenes, this literary critic hovers serenely above the scene. She is seemingly “wise to what it’s really about,” rational, not caught up in the spectacle of Fawn Hall’s hair or Oliver North’s smile, and yet still not needing to sort through the knotty details or evaluate the actions by any standards of truth, reason, or morality. Finding the

truth is too difficult, maybe impossible. As the legal secretary said, *USA Today* in hand,

It has been my opinion for a long time that newspaper articles are more or less trying to fill up space. They give all the information at the beginning and then repeat themselves over and over until x amount of space is taken. I'd rather watch the evening news – just a half an hour is all I want to find out what happened.

Ironically, it is the literary critics and those conversing with them who are most often apt to complain about the media's "sensationalism," as the legal secretary called it. Another complained that it is "billed as entertainment," not recognizing his and his companion's own roles in treating it as entertainment. Yet some people, according to Liebes and Katz, treat even "Dallas" more seriously, drawing out real life, moralistic implications of the show. The literary critic assumes that it would be foolish for the critic to treat it seriously when the rest of the audience and players appear not to be. I asked one such man, "Do you think the truth will come out of the Iran contra hearings?" He chortled,

Who knows? I like the way Oliver North handled himself in front of his peers and the people judging him. He handles himself maturely and with respect – I'd like to say honestly, but who knows? I like the way he's handling himself. When I see people like Admiral Poindexter getting up there smoking his pipe like he's sitting in his house – it's too casual for me.

Without rancor, he might have been discussing the staging of a play. "I saw Poindexter today, and he did a pretty good job but not half as good as North did," said a community college student in a suburban mall. His father joined in, to say that "they should just figure out what went wrong and fix it," but the son interrupted:

"You can only get so much of it – you don't know half of what's going on. Oliver North admitted he lies. You don't know if what he's saying is true. You're not gonna get the truth, at least the important stuff."

I asked, "So how come you like him?"

He answered: "He's the underdog – you see a person being questioned by so many people, especially politicians and the way they address him."

The literary critics are trapped in their armchairs. They keep circling back to the staging, and even imply that the show created the whole issue. "The whole business of Olliewood," as one man called it, apparently would not exist if not for the cameras. "The only difference is,



Reagan got caught.” He and his wife railed at the “circus atmosphere” of the hearings. The solution, the husband said, would be to “take the tv cameras out. Everyone’s so concerned they got every hair in place and all that crap. The appearances and image is too much.”

This way of talking perhaps explains many people’s willingness to let the government keep secrets. If it is just a show, and if, as the wife said, “it makes us look like a laughing stock to the other countries because we broadcast the hearings,” then why bother showing it? It has no real consequences. People in other countries do not die because of it; they only laugh.

A question impossible to ask in this context concerns the real-life effects of the show, or the reality that may exist apart from the show. I asked the couple whether they thought that the secret of arms shipments to Nicaragua could be kept from the Nicaraguans themselves, and mentioned, trying to sound as abstracted as the couple, that other countries’ newspapers had been talking for a while before ours did about U.S. shipments to the contras. Unable to focus on that question, the husband immediately shifted the focus back onto the audience – minus himself, the critic: “The general public is rather apathetic. If they were really that strong against it – (pause). Oliver North is a little fish. They’re playing it up too much.”<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to the literary critic’s convoluted stance, this man from Cincinnati seemed genuinely unable or unwilling to distinguish between the show and the real thing. “Oliver North’s a hero. No, he’s a good man on tv, he began.

I asked, “Which, good on tv, or a hero?”

“He comes across good on television.”

I asked again, “What does that mean – he’s a good person, or a good actor?”

“He’s a good person, He’s shielding someone higher than him.”

This is the man the literary critics assume to be typical, from whom the literary critics try so hard to distance themselves.

### *Intimidated speakers I: Willing but unable*

This response is neither defiantly self-absorbed as the stances described above are, nor is it a show of responsibility. Unlike the three

types of irreverent speakers, who could capitalize on their ignorance and powerlessness, these speakers seemed to acknowledge defeat, by keeping as quiet as possible about things they felt unqualified to discuss. Often women, always with low-status jobs or unemployed, people of this type let me interview them by mistake.

One interview was in a windy, cement shopping plaza, where a market-research canvasser, dressed neatly in jeans and an old windbreaker, asked me to fill out her questionnaire about my cracker consumption, and to taste-test a new type of cracker. So I traded my opinions on crackers for hers on politics.

Her apathy was startlingly bland. In a monotone, she said that she really had no idea what the Iran contra affair was. A young mother with a more than full-time job, living in a mass-produced suburb far from her job, she was tired. She was “not interested in national politics,” though “maybe something exciting will happen some day that will grab my attention.” I asked: “What do you think – what do people mean when they say this country is a democracy?”

She answered very slowly: “I don’t know. (long pause) I really don’t know. It just has something to do with the bigwigs in Washington. They get paid to take care of all that so that I don’t have to get into it.”

News stories she would follow would address “missing children, because of my son... drugs and children.”

Another person who spoke to me by “mistake,” to interrupt a street-person who was haranguing me, had also found no way at all to make good on his ignorance; making his ignorance seem neither intentional, nor itself a commentary on the faulty political process.

“I really don’t understand it (the Iran-contra affair) so I could make no comment. I hear it on the news and I don’t know what’s going on.”

I asked: “What do you think the main question – the question, let alone the answers – is? What should they be finding out?”

He said, apologetically, “How they use all that money. It don’t seem right, does it? Heheh. I’m sorry. I’m confused. I don’t know that much to make a decision. Don’t put on the news what I have to say because I don’t know what to say.”

He was serious about politics, and said he cared, but was afraid to talk.

*Intimidated speaker II: Cliché-users*

For some people, talking politics means trading aphorisms and fancy phrases. A New Jersey grandmother, for example, said that the stock market fall showed that

there is no one in authority now who has know-how ... to deal with what's coming up in the future, which is important to the common masses.... You have to put into the barrel before you can take out, and we've been taking out too long. You have to pay the fiddler if you're going to dance, right?

They often used words that begin with capital letters: "Freedom," "Democracy," "Masses." Of course these words have meanings; hundreds of them, in fact. Democracy, for example, often means, "political forms after the American fashion,"<sup>43</sup> or even just "American."

One use of clichés might be to express thoughts the speaker has genuinely felt. Another use could just be a means of saving face when surprised, nervous, or intimidated.

The first use is like the way lovers use corny love songs. Several old men yelled at me, saying I should be asking about the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, that if the communists took over it would be worse than any Iran contra affair, and that journalists are all a bunch of leftists. These men certainly seemed convinced of their clichés. It was impossible to ask them anything that could call the clichés' truth into question.

Some other cliché users were equally concerned with the message behind the clichés. One man, a dentist, wanted to sound patriotic, saying, "communism is encroaching. We have to watch our personal Freedoms – be vigilant. We have the right to know, and freedom of speech, but in a lot of ways that kills us. All the freedoms hinder us because you have to do some things in secret."

The competition is doing it, the man said, and referred to a litany of Soviet evils. When I asked who the secret was being kept from, he laughed. "Hm. Ha. I don't know. That's a good question. The real mission was to get the hostages [pause] out [pause]. I don't think the original intention was to fund the contras, and then launched on a fanciful explanation of how the government suddenly found extra money on its hands and serendipitously decided to fund the contras with it. The

truisms had been good tools for displaying patriotism without having to devote serious concentration to it. When they failed, though, it was more important for him to defend patriotism than to continue to sound impressive. In his version of public speech, getting the right message out was more important than sounding smooth. So, if not for his lack reference to other conversations and his lack of information, I could classify him as a “concerned speaker” (see below).

This man’s brother, though, was a roofer who used clichés as a means of saving face. Trusims and puffy words afford safety: it must be right if it is an aphorism. He relentlessly clung to clichés, and repeated verbatim what officials had said about the affair: “A few mistakes were made, but the people involved were doing what’s best for the country... The price of freedom is [pause] pretty expensive.” I asked him from whom he thought the secret was being kept, and he bristled nervously at being put on the spot, “You can’t have everybody knowing everything. Freedom means eternal [pause] Vigilance. You have to be careful.” Still, he made no effort to persuade me or his family.

Most of the platitudinous people recited lessons in anti-communism, but one man seemingly on the other side also appeared to be repeating scattered phrases he had heard, about the Constitution’s being violated and so forth, without putting them together or being able to explain to his companion the reasoning behind the smooth phrases.

### *Concerned citizens I: Uninformed on principle*

One way of speaking seriously about politics is to make an argument, to try to convince, to try to get out a message. Unlike the cliché-users, the concerned citizens displayed a more direct, engaged relation to politics. However, some concerned people say they try to avoid the news because they find it too upsetting. Reading about their ignorance in a poll, one might assume that they were apathetic. Mostly women, mostly young, many black, and many who initially said they did not want to talk, perhaps they had more reason than others to believe that the society should have become more fair, and so, felt more disappointed at its failings. One woman, for example, said she did not know anything about the Iran Contra affair and was just about to take her leave when she circled back to say more:

I saw a thing between commercials and they were spending like forty million on missiles or something and then they give a half a million to the homeless. When I look at things like that, I just think: it's a bunch of shit. Really, when grown men and women can't even get along and instead of spending on giving someone a home you spend it on things that you don't even know if you're gonna use – or when you *do* use them you're gonna total out everybody. So that's why I don't deal with it. I try to ignore it.

In another interview, a woman stood quietly while her verbose companion spoke to me. Finally, she softly explained why she was so quiet:

It's hard to find disappointment in someone whose almost got control of your whole life. His [Reagan's] decisions are very important. He can make the big one to make us all just disappear. And when he screws up, it really pisses me off, because I don't like people playing with my life like that. I'm just barely in college, and don't have any kids [laughs] and he screws up, and I could die tomorrow without ever knowing what having a baby feels like or reaching my goals or doing things I want to do: get a really good job and take care of my mom and let her relax some. So there's no telling, so I have to live my life day-by-day, cause I don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow.

Their way of speaking draws attention to the substance of the political world, not the show. People who described politics less in terms of the “show” spoke, themselves, in a less showy way. Rather than putting on a show, they said with their quiet tone that there is almost no point in speaking in such a meaningless world. Such an approach painfully brings to mind the advice Hegel cites on how one might best bring up a son:

By making him the citizen of a state with good laws . . . His commonest functions, are saved from nothingness and given reality solely by the universal maintaining medium, that is, through the power of the whole people of which he is a member. The whole . . . is that for which he sacrifices himself, and through which sacrifice he fulfills himself.<sup>44</sup>

Perceiving the absence of a good state, many people speak as if there is nothing they can do to make their world meaningful.

*Concerned citizens II: Referring to past conversations to establish a political position*

Finally, I found a few people giving serious and somewhat informed discussions of fundamental issues of justice, fairness, and democracy. These responses are the type polls expect and assume; these are the

citizens “serious” journalists aspire to address. Their responses carried with them a basic faith in the speaker’s capacity and right to participate in political decisions and debates, and referred to some information.

Most importantly, they referred to conversations they themselves had had on the issue. Opinions in this group varied, but unlike the uninformed messengers, these people implied that it really did matter what they said. Previous discussions they had had on the matter were important enough to repeat; repeating the discussions grounded such speakers in a real context. The characteristic phrase among this type of speaker was “We think...” That is, they all placed themselves in a group, evaluating not just the various opinions “out there” but also evaluating their own relationships to the people they perceive to be holding those opinions.

When two nurses talked about politics, they referred to earlier political conversations they held on the ward, and to the alternative radio station that played on the ward. They wanted it known that politics is not just for politicians; one listened to the hearings with her son. “I want him to know that just because they’re high mucky mucks doesn’t mean they’re pure and white.” One man energetically declared, four times, in various ways:

as an American soldier who fought in World War II, I was in combat for five years and I know a lot of vets. I can’t find any veteran who agrees with the polls that say North is a hero.

Later, he mentioned: I found four or five people who *say* they were vets who support Oliver North, but I asked them if they were ever in combat, in actual combat, and they said no – they’re what we call “playground soldiers.”

He placed himself very precisely in the political landscape. Compare that to some of the irreverent speakers, who attributed their opinions to the media:

“Reagan was cool before,” said one irreverent speaker.

Everybody liked him. But now, a lot of people cut up on him. Like if you watch “Saturday Night Live,” they’re always making it seem like he’s lying, so it seems he used to be good. People liked him. Now, all the comedians cop on him, so why can’t I?”

By consciously planting themselves in a specific place in the social landscape, the concerned speakers were able to avoid being swept into the “spiral of silence”<sup>45</sup> in which people, being generally eager to

please, are less likely to talk about their political opinions if they perceive that their opinions are unpopular. By referring to “their own type” of person, they do not back off of unpopular or earnestly held opinions.

### Content and form

In general, not just among the “concerned” speakers, the items people would check off had they been presented with a questionnaire did not correlate, in my mind, with the relations people displayed *toward* those opinions. Examples of the discrepancy between the “contents” and “displays” abound:

One “concerned” woman said she believed North and Poindexter were “doing the right thing for their country,” because her friend who toured Nicaragua said that “it is an extremely impoverished nation and there’s very little when you go to the grocery store, very little on the shelf, maybe green beans and glasses.” Though she favored government secrecy, her displays embodied a democratic ideal of honoring the opinions of people like herself. She assumed she should speak and be heard. Everybody (except a crystal-toting Grateful Dead follower, who said the forces of Truth always win) said that the hearings would not reveal the truth about the Iran contra affair. Many types said that the money should be spent at home, rather than abroad.

As ethnomethodologists would predict, most of the interactions provided continuously emerging redefinitions of “what was going on.”<sup>46</sup> So, although many types of speakers began by saying “It’s all a show,” later conversation provided new meanings to the statement, framing it as a statement of fact, a complaint, or a joke, or a thing said to impress a journalist. For example, this young black secretary’s statement could resemble the opinion of a literary-critic type. She said,

We have an immigrant from Russia in our office who says, “Oh, this is great, you can really hear the government.” She doesn’t realize – I mean, *everybody* knows – even those that are not that political to those that are really into politics – that he’s covering up, that it’s just a big show.

But later, she earnestly described a paper she wrote on Central America for a community-college course. While the Iran contra affair may be a show, and the people in power may be out for themselves, *she* was

serious and concerned, and continued with a “We think . . .” type stance:

Why is it so important to keep South America away from the influence of the East? It just seems like a waste of money and time. A lot of people – the working staff – agree, but the lawyers – because it’s corporate law and so they’re really into the economics of it – they’re Republicans, they don’t agree. But the working people want to get out of Nicaragua – with people not having enough for welfare, for education and them spending billions and billions of dollars – that really ticks people off.

### **Further questions raised by this approach**

I have tried to show how “holding an opinion” means different things to different people; to show that paying attention to displays is one way to study these differences; and to show how the context helps give meaning to the speech and vice versa.

But once it becomes clear that displays and context do matter, a range of related questions comes into view, suggesting the outlines of a more systematic method for studying displays in context. Three questions emerge especially clearly.

A more systematic method for answering these three questions and the other questions of this paper would study a set of people in a variety of contexts, to explore the relation between the broader social context, the immediate context, and display. Studying a set of people in a range of contexts, both public and private, would make it possible to ask whether people do in fact display unserious poses because they are politically powerless.<sup>47</sup> How would such an approach begin to address the three questions?

1. How can I know who the speakers “really” are, or how the displays relate to their “real” opinions? Would they display very different relations to politics in other contexts? My having acknowledged differences in displays does not mean I have understood all the differences. To the extent that respondents and I live in the same culture, and can communicate, I could be confident that I interpreted their grins, chuckles, winks, and declamations correctly. However, to the extent that they and I do not share a culture, I may have misunderstood them. Following them around from one context to another would help me fill in the outlines of their responses. Paul Lichterman suggests thinking



about the social researcher along these lines, as a “translator,” someone who shows how the displays make sense in the person’s context.<sup>48</sup> This means learning their “language,” which is best accomplished by hearing peers interpret each other’s displays.

2. How do displays relate to real political power? How, if at all, does it matter what they think about these issues? Bourdieu says some classes produce serious, “politica” opinions, while others “respond not to the question that is actually asked, but to a question they produce from their own resources, i.e., from the practical principles of their class ethos.”<sup>49</sup> Many studies show that elite groups are more likely to proffer political opinions when surveyed,<sup>50</sup> more likely to vote and participate in many other aspects of political life,<sup>51</sup> and more likely to feel comfortable speaking publicly.<sup>52</sup> They are shown to have more practice at making influential decisions in their jobs, and often have an opportunity to see the broader political picture in the course of their work.<sup>53</sup> People may intuit their class chances at being in that position of responsibility, and develop a relation to politics based on their chances.<sup>54</sup>

Any talk about politics may be nothing but a palliative for structurally powerless groups, a “symbolic substitute for power, a means of reproducing the absence of political power.”<sup>55</sup> A study of the broader context would trace moments of “concerned speech,” to find out how, if at all, they are received by the larger political institutions that have the power to act on the concerns expressed.<sup>56</sup> Does citizens’ seriousness ever become more than a symbolic substitute for power? Goffman would look at the face-to-face interaction, but a study of context should include examination of a pool of “resources” larger than the situation Goffman would describe.

3. What context could elicit the public voices of people who never engage in public debate? What is “public” in that case? Many studies show that membership in a publicly accessible group is a powerful force working against the limitations of class.<sup>57</sup> The question that research into political displays could begin to answer is, “By what interactive processes do groups reproduce, or challenge, their power?”

Michel Foucault says institutional discourses automatically create subjects.<sup>58</sup> Presumably, some “total” contexts, such as jails and mental hospitals, more “automatically” evoke certain subjects (as Foucault says) and certain displays (as Goffman says). But other contexts do not work so automatically.

So, it would be especially important to study the displays common in voluntary associations and other potentially public groups: the PTA's, fishing clubs, bars, and unions that can be the spawning grounds for activism. Such a study would show how these groups help members stay politically unengaged, or how these groups help members engage in broader issues. Part of what makes an issue public is how members define and discuss it.<sup>59</sup> Even if political talk is just a palliative for powerlessness, this structural situation will not change unless many groups act to change it, and action must be accompanied by speech.<sup>60</sup>

### **Honoring the public context**

Americans tend to "form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands."<sup>61</sup> By emphasizing the privateness of opinions, standard political sociology research can accentuate this individualism, undermining the political importance of face-to-face discussion and organizations that classical democratic theorists<sup>62</sup> call the "schools for democracy." Before polling became widespread, politicians relied on labor representatives, grassroots party leaders, and other voluntary associations for a picture of the public's opinion.<sup>63</sup> When the usefulness of polling was still a matter of debate, a happy quantifier defended polls against symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer's critique, writing: "Sooner or later the opinion poll is going to be used by government as a day-to-day public opinion audit. As such it will be a means of holding pressure groups in check and forcing them to put their alleged popular support in evidence."<sup>64</sup>

Such research should not be used as an understudy for the absent public sphere, or as a more democratic measure of the popular will than actual organizations. If, as John Dewey said, "communication of the results of social inquiry is the same thing as the formation of public opinion,"<sup>65</sup> privatized methods such as polling could become what Habermas would call a "system" in danger of "colonizing the lifeworld" as it is intersubjectively embodied in public speech. Researchers interested in giving new life to the public sphere should respect political speech itself, both as a form of action in itself and as a topic for research.

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## Notes

1. ABC/Washington Post survey, Aug. 3–5. (exact wording: “Do you happen to know which side the U.S. is backing in Nicaragua, the rebels or the government?”)
2. For a summary of some of these, see Jay Rosen, “Public Knowledge/Private Ignorance,” Center for War, Peace and the News Media, vol. 1 (1987): 1–4. He cites polls that found, for example, that one quarter of Americans believe China is a territory of the Soviet Union; only 19 percent knew in 1985 that the United States has no policy against first-strike use of nuclear weapons; and less than half could name the leader of the Soviet Union right after a major summit meeting had put his name in all the headlines. Also see W. Russell Neuman, *The Paradox of Mass Politics* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1986).
3. Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap*, (New York: Free Press, 1983) and an update of some of their statistics, “The Confidence Gap during the Reagan Years, 1981–1987,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 102, 1–23; see also James Wright, *The Dissent of the Governed: Alienation and Democracy in America*, from Quantitative Studies in Social Relations series, Peter Rossi, editor (N.Y.: Academic Press, 1976).
4. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).
5. The literature on this is large and wide ranging. Several good collections of essays show the variety of approaches to the question, including John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, editors *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication* (New York: Holt, 1972) and Pier Paolo Giglioli’s *Language and Social Context* (New York: Penguin, 1972).
6. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1967), 29.
7. It aired on Pacifica Radio, KPFA-FM, November, 1987.
8. “Public Opinion Does Not Exist,” in *Communication and Class Struggle*, vol. 1, Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub, editors, (N.Y.: International General, 1979), 124–129.
9. Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
10. Robert Lane (N.Y.: Free Press, 1962). Though I am criticizing Lane’s methodology here, I would like to acknowledge with gratitude, that discussions I had with him when I was an undergraduate played a big part in inspiring me to continue my studies past college.
11. *Ibid.*, 9, footnote 7.
12. *Ibid.*, 7.

13. For an interesting discussion of the way the “spontaneous” interview with the “ordinary” person is correctly staged, and how filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard tried to “create” a different kind of “person” by staging a different type of interview, see Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Image, Sounds, Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), especially p. 145.
14. For a thoughtful discussion, see Jay Rosen, *The Press and the Public*, (unpublished dissertation, New York University, 1985).
15. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958).
16. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1* (Boston: Beacon, 1984).
17. Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart*.
18. “Speaking of the President: Political Structure and Representational Form in U.S. and Italian Television News,” *Theory and Society*, 13, 829–850.
19. “The Audience Experience with Television News,” *Journalism Monographs*, 55, April, 1978.
20. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1973), 6–7.
21. For example, I took part in a week-long training session for a study of physical and mental health in 1980 (and went door-to-door for half a year collecting interview data, in a study co-sponsored by the Yale University Department of Sociology and the U.S. Department of Health; the actual trainers were out-of-town market researchers) in which about one hundred interviewers were trained to conduct intimate, hour-long interviews in subjects’ homes. The instructors treated this issue as a simple one: simply repeat the question three times and follow the interview schedule. When alone with strangers in their homes, asking about such issues as sexual problems, criminal record, psychological problems, and drug use, ignoring the normal cues of interaction was sometimes a rude and sometimes a dangerous thing to do. Many interviewers worried about that; some eventually quit this job because of the eeriness and potential danger involved. It was like the experiment Garfinkel outlines (*Studies in Ethnomethodology*) in which he tells his students to go home for vacation and pretend not to take any background knowledge for granted. Parents assume that students are ill, crazy, or trying to be rude.
22. Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Reviews*, 51 (1986): 273–286.
23. C. Wright Mills, “Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motives,” in Irving Horowitz, editor, *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1963).
24. *Ibid.*, 447.
25. Burns Roper, “Some Things That Concern Me,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47 (1983), 303–309.
26. Roper, *ibid.*, and Sam McFarland, “Effects of Question Order on Survey Responses,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45 (1981), 208–215.
27. Lipset and Schneider, *The Confidence Gap*, 235–236.
28. A good example discovered by Joan Huber and William Form (*Income and Ideology: An Analysis of the American Political Formula*, (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1973)) is that many people say that everyone in America has an equal chance to get ahead, while few say that a poor boy from a specific local bad neighborhood has a good a chance as a rich boy from the country club district. See also Lipset and Schneider, *The Confidence Gap*, 241.
29. Cited in Wright, *The Dissent of the Governed*, 95.
30. All cited in George Bishop, Alfred Tuchfarber, and Robert Oldendick, “Opinions

- on Fictitious Issues: The Pressure to Answer Survey Questions," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50 (1986): 240–250.
31. Roper, "Some Things that Concern Me."
  32. For example, pro-contra-aid polling enthusiast Carl Everett Ladd (*Public Opinion*, Sept./Oct. 1987), argues that even though polls show most U.S. citizens opposed to contra aid, Americans still hold firmly anti-communist values, and that those stable values matter more than their fleeting opinions formed in ignorance. He says poll questions should emphasize the "fact" that the Nicaraguan government is "Communist," should say which side the U.S. president was on, and should not mention that the contras were trying to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. Faced with what should seem to a polling enthusiast like unequivocal data, he finally concludes, "in some instances (of polling) we simply don't know what many respondents intended to say."
  33. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, 31.
  34. Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, (N.Y.: Pantheon, 1989).
  35. See, for example, Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock and Roll*, (N.Y.: Pantheon, 1981); Paul Willis, *Profane Culture*, (London: RKP, 1978) and "Symbolism and Practice: A Theory for the Social Meaning of Pop Music," (undated manuscript); Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, "Cross-Cultural Readings of 'Dallas': Patterns of Involvement in Television Fiction," (paper read at the International Television Studies Conference, British Film Institute, London, 1985). However, *news* reception studies (for example, David Morley, *The "Nation-wide" Audience: Structure and Decoding*, Television Monograph 10, British Film Institute, London) take the forms by which audiences discuss news programs as given, and only examine the content.
  36. The felicitous phrase comes from an editorial printed in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 22, 1987, by Reverend F. Forrester Church.
  37. See Franco Moretti, "The Spell of Indecision," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988; edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg), 339–344; also Mark Crispin Miller, *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988).
  38. *Anatomy of Criticism* (N.Y.: Atheneum, 1970 (1957)), 47.
  39. His distinction should give organizations such as ACORN pause. Such organizations assume that giving people a small problem to solve such as getting a stop sign will inspire them to move on, to tackle larger problems.
  40. John Gumperz shows how important such mock accents are. In *Discourse Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), Gumperz quotes a black student who had just asked his professor, in "standard" English, for a fellowship recommendation. Mocking a "hick" accent, the black student turned to the other black students present and said, "Ahma git me a gi-ig," meaning "I'm going to get some money," and said in an accent that "said" to the other black students, "This is what we blacks have to do to survive in white society, but I'm still with you."
  41. "Cross-Cultural Readings of 'Dallas.'"
  42. The literary critics' response to the stock-market crash was particularly interesting. Most people with whom I spoke treated the politicians' and stock brokers' alarm as a show, too, and did not mention any real consequences such a show might have. Ironically, such lack of confidence in the media may have minimized the crash's effect: if consumers did not believe media reports of the crash, they may not have cut back on their consumption or investment. Standard Keynesian economics

would say that a falling market is an important factor in the spiral of shrinking consumption and shrinking production that can lead to a depression.

43. Geoffrey Gorer, quoted in Lane, *Political Ideology*, 82.
44. *The Philosophy of Hegel*, Carl Friedrich, editor (N.Y.: Modern Library, 1954), 268.
45. *The Spiral of Silence* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984).
46. This is a good example of the problems involved in distilling “illocutionary force” out of individual sentences, as language philosophers such as John Searle say is possible to do. It is also an argument against content analysis as a method of analysis, because counting words or phrases would simply miss the tone and subsequent reappraisals of the phrases.
47. This would add “displays” as a step in the process of acquiescence described in John Gaventa’s *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980).
48. Paul Lichterman, “Revisiting a Gramscian Dilemma: Problems and Possibilities in Bourdieu’s Analysis of Culture and Politics,” paper delivered at American Sociological Association meeting, August 1989.
49. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 435.
50. Joe Francis and Lawrence Busch, “What We Don’t Know About the ‘Don’t Knows,’” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45, (1975), 208–215; also Jean Converse, “Predicting ‘No Opinion’ in the Polls, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 40 (1976): 515–530.
51. See for example, Sidney Verba, Norman Nie, and Jae-on Kim, *Participation and Political Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
52. See, for a splendid study of this, Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980).
53. Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
54. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, One man in a baseball hat and a work uniform, for example, declined a taped interview: “You should ask that guy [nodding toward a dapper man in a three-piece suit]. I don’t read the politics stuff. I’m no politician.” On the other hand, an elite-university student said that the reason she stayed informed was that “if you are in a position of responsibility in government [a real possibility for her], or voting even, it’s important to be informed.”
55. Robert Alford and Roger Friedland, “Political Participation and Public Policy,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 1 (1975): 474.
56. James Wright, (*The Dissent of the Governed*), argues that political alienation, as measured statistically, has risen and fallen in the post-war era in tandem with untrustworthy acts on the part of the government. The problem is, I suspect, that government officials engage in untrustworthy acts often. Whether they are caught probably depends partly on the public impetus to discover or ignore such acts. So lack of trust in the government is not just an *effect* of untrustworthy governmental actions, as Wright says, but also, lack of trust *causes* governmental dishonesty to be exposed, in effect, bringing such scandals into public existence.
57. Roland Cayrol, “Du bon usage des sondages,” and Guy Michelat and Michel Simonet, “Les <sans reponse> aux questions politiques,” both in *Pouvoirs*, 33, (1985), 5–14; also Verba, Nie, and Kim, *Participation and Political Equality*. As a unionist I interviewed succinctly described the importance of membership, “80% of the people, I categorize as cabbage heads.... Of the other 20%, maybe 10% are in on the [Iran contra] affair, and the other 10% *do* think, and *might do something if there was an organization for them to follow*.”

58. See, for example, *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, (N.Y.: Pantheon, 1972), 55.
59. Hannah Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory*, vol. 9 (August 1981): 327-352.
60. One of the first political events I helped organize was a teach-in. Toward the end of it, someone yelled, "Why are we just sitting around *talking*? I thought we were gonna *do* something." I timidly responded that organizing the teach-in *was* doing something, but I had my doubts.
61. *Democracy in America*, J. P. Mayer, editor (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969).
62. See Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*.
63. Benjamin Ginsburg, *The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power*, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1986).
64. Julian Woodward, "Discussion," in Herbert Blumer's article, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," 1948: *American Sociological Review*, 13, 542-554.
65. *The Public and its Problems*, (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1927).