

## CHAPTER TWO. THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF MOBILIZING PUBLIC OPINION?

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The basic charge of this volume is as simple as it is elusive. How can individual incentives and institutional mechanisms be designed and used to generate genuine demands for accountability? The problematic is simple because its underlying logic is transparent. Social accountability mechanisms, properly designed, should improve the ability of state actors and the development community to accurately read the needs of the populations they serve and provide the public goods and public policies that match those needs. I take accountability here to be a benchmark of good governance that finds evidence of its presence in the conjoint occurrence of three outcomes: transparency in the relationship between principals and agents, a sense of obligation among agents to be responsive to their principals, and the power for principals to punish or pink-slip their agents if they do not do so. *Social* accountability is the approach to achieving this accountability through the civic society mechanisms that rely on citizen engagement and participation. Institutional innovations like participatory budgeting, citizen advisory boards, civic journalism, public expenditure tracking, social audits and citizen report cards work to the extent that unauthorized, dispossessed, or otherwise quiescent principals make their needs and demands known to their elected and appointed agents. Their agents, as a result, better understand their constituency's preferences and work toward addressing them meaningfully and effectively.

Yet the problematic is also elusive if for no other reason than that such a seamlessly interdependent relationship between citizens and the state is so rarely achieved. The simplicity of the logic behind social accountability is not so easily translatable into mobilized publics and institutionalized mechanisms that work. If the mechanisms here were as obvious and optimal as they appear, their ends should already be achieved, save for the transaction costs of institutionalizing such arrangements. Yet the "haves" remain as they are everywhere, and in stark and sobering contrast to "have-nots." It is simply not tenable that public will among the have-nots tolerates and gives assent to poverty, child labor, sweatshops, discrimination, environmental degradation, occupational hazards, corruption and waste, and other unwelcome outcomes that remain rife in the world. No one, of course, expects social accountability mechanisms to a panacea for the inability of states and markets to regulate our political and economic arrangements justly and effectively. Nor should we expect them to be so.

How then do we reckon a role for public opinion to generate bottom-up demand for political accountability? Perhaps the proper precept here follows the intuition behind the view, usually attributed to Sir Winston Churchill, that "democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." The ideal should not be the enemy of the possible. Under currently lived conditions that are clearly suboptimal, there is more to be gained from figuring out how

to design institutional arrangements that can push us to *more* optimal states of affairs than there is to dickering willy-nilly about the *most* optimal state of affairs. In this chapter, I take this precept to heart and examine the limits and opportunities that public opinion – properly conceived and meaningfully motivated – places on the prospects of generating genuine demand for accountability. I start where most such treatments of public opinion end: with a heavy dose of skepticism and dismay about the potential for public opinion as a foundation for responsiveness, accountability, and good governance. Against this view, I argue that there are a variety of constructions of public opinion and a broad range of political contexts in which constructed publics are either well adapted or ill-suited to the background aims of political accountability.

### **The Impossibility of Generating Genuine Demand?**

There are at least two interrelated questions about public opinion that ought to begin any conversation about whether “genuine demand” for accountability can be generated. The first is whether public opinion can be coherent and competent enough to be an active, autonomous pressure for political responsiveness and good governance. The second is whether there are effective mechanisms in place for the public to voice its will to state actors and be heard. Much of the focus among advocates of social accountability has been on this second question, and rightly so. Absent institutional arrangements like community scorecards, citizens’ report cards, participatory budgeting, and public expenditure tracking, the transaction costs for citizens to become active and for the public’s will to become voiced are often simply too high. Absent mechanisms that allow for the public to express their will to political leaders, the elites have no immediate incentives – save for the minimal conditions of regular elections and referenda under democratic regimes – to sway to that will.

The relevance of the second question – which many of the chapters in this book address – is premised on successfully clearing the first question about the very possibility of a public will itself. Institutional arrangements like social accountability mechanisms can only work if the people know what they want, are mad about not getting it (or not being able to tell their representatives what they want), and are willing to invest a piece of themselves into changing the status quo. Here there is a long tradition of distrust and defeatism. Walter Lippmann, for instance, writes disparagingly about public opinion as a “blooming, buzzing confusion” and nothing more than fictive “pictures in our heads.” More recently, Jurgen Habermas, Noam Chomsky, and others decry public opinion as a form of “manufactured publicity” that does little more than uphold political consent and legitimacy for ruling elites, irrespective of their performance in government. Even Winston Churchill, whose conditional defense of democracy we cited earlier, is also alleged to have acerbically avowed, “the argument against democracy is a five minute conversation with the average voter.”

The rub here is that the strongest evidence from empirical studies of political behavior tells us that these premises are rarely met, at least not without the sort of care and attention to institutional design and message framing that we are here to talk

about. Scholars regularly line up, single-file, behind Philip Converse's conclusion that most data on public opinion represents "non-attitudes." Research abounds to show that ordinary people give inconsistent answers to a question when asked that question at different times and in different contexts; they appear stunningly ignorant of even the basic facts about politics and who they are being governed by; their views on defining political issues of the day do not cohere together in any consistent way with their self-avowed political orientation; they appear to hold views that run directly against their own material well-being; those who stand most to gain from changes in the status quo appear least inclined to do anything about it; and so on.

The most damning versions of this skepticism about public opinion reprise V. O. Key's charge that "the voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input." Rather than lead the charge for elite policy-makers (and agencies that implement their policies) to do better via greater transparency and participatory inputs, it may then be the case that the public follows instead. Elite actors – attuned to a changing political environment that cultivates pressures to achieve accountability – may design mechanisms that generate public demand and mobilize citizen engagement to their advantage. As this view goes, the public comes to equate the building of dams in India's Narmada River Valley, China's Three Gorges, Zimbabwe's Zambezi River Basin with economic development – and not the displacement of people, the placement of indigenous cultures at risk, and the degradation of the environment – because political elites and media conglomerates control the message. To the cynic who sees herself as a realist, perhaps social accountability mechanisms do little more than act as an institutional shield for ruling elites who benefit from the status quo.

### **In Defense of a Public Will**

Is this volume then a non-starter? Are we doomed to fail before we begin? I think clearly not. As many of the chapters in this volume attest, there are many cases and country contexts where there is a meaningful and genuine sense of public will that is mobilized and that nurtures and sustains the kind of mutual interdependence between citizens and the state that is at the heart of political accountability and responsiveness. There are several recourses here beyond simply giving up on the public (as many, if not most, academic political scientists in the U.S. have done) or viewing the public as horses being led to water by political elites and made to drink.

The first defense of the regulative ideal of public opinion is to note that most scholarship on the subject is based entirely on the analysis of survey data. The great allure of polls is their ability – when properly sampled to reflect a representative cross-section of the population in question – to let the few speak efficiently and accurately for the many. Yet surveys are just one among many possible ways of gauging the public's views on politics and governance. Throughout history there have been a diversity of alternate modes of public political expression ranging from festivals, strikes, riots, charivaris, study circles, and coffeehouse chats to focus groups, political caucuses,

elections, and revolutions. And with the relentless march of modern technology, ever newer forms of public expression are emerging, from radio and television talk shows, to televised "town hall meetings" and "deliberative polls," and, most recently, to Internet-based venues like blogs and social networking sites.

Perhaps more important than the multiplicity of modes of public expression are the various shortcomings of survey data as a sole measure of public opinion. Here Pierre Bourdieu, echoing Herbert Blumer before him, controversially declares that "*l'opinion publique n'existe pas*" because surveys make three troublesome assumptions: that everyone's opinion is equal; that, on a given issue, everyone actually holds an opinion; and that a consensus exists about what questions merit asking (and, by corollary, that surveys can know what that consensus is). Beyond this ontological concern, surveys are also limited methodologically. Specifically, survey researchers operate on the premise that their questions can replicate the function of surgical probes into their respondents' minds. Viewed thus, the best way to gauge public opinion is by testing individuals in isolation, anonymously, using a fixed script, and deracinated from the messy, hurly-burly real-world contexts in which politics happens.

A second defense of public opinion harks back to Churchill's conditional defense of democracy. The public's will may not look coherent and competent enough to be a source of genuine demand for accountability and social change *all the time, under all circumstances, across all contexts*. Yet it does not follow from this logically, that genuine demand cannot be generation from the bottom-up sometimes, under some circumstances, in some contexts. Quantitative social science research – of the sort that uses opinion surveys to condemn the civic competence of ordinary citizens – is built on predicting and explaining average events based on probability theory (note the language of "central tendency," "expected value," "maximum likelihood").

Objectives like generating genuine demand for accountability are not ordinary events. They occur within "windows of opportunity" as a result of the convergence of many factors that the remaining chapters in this book will examine, including: (1) properly motivating and adequately informing state and civil society actors; (2) institutionalizing mechanisms for two-way communications between the state and civil society; (3) building citizen capacity through deliberative moments and civic education; (4) training journalists and civil society actors to value and work for accountability; (5) fostering horizontal and lateral relations within the state to work in concert; and so on. The contrast, in shorthand, is between explaining average events – which will prefigure the seeming impossibility of generating meaningful and sustained public demand for accountability – and understanding best practices in the real-world circumstances where that public demand is wrought.

### **A Framework of Political Contexts for Generating Public Will**

Thus far I have noted several flawed and interrelated sources of skepticism about the possibility of a generative, regulative public opinion. Skeptics rely too single-handedly on opinion surveys; these opinion surveys often test for the presence of

impractically high standards of civic competence and find most people wanting most of the time; norms of social science scholarship demand attention to the average, most likely occurrence and presume the irrelevance of exceptional moments of mobilized public will and inspired citizen activism. If standard practices and modes of inquiry fail us, then, how should we proceed?

There are a variety of ways forward, many of them represented well in other chapters of this volume. Here I highlight four critical dimensions of public opinion that present a general framework of the political contexts in which real publics are constructed. The dimensions correspond to the following questions about public opinion:

- (1) Which public?
- (2) What mode of expression?
- (3) What kind of influence?
- (4) How authorized a public?

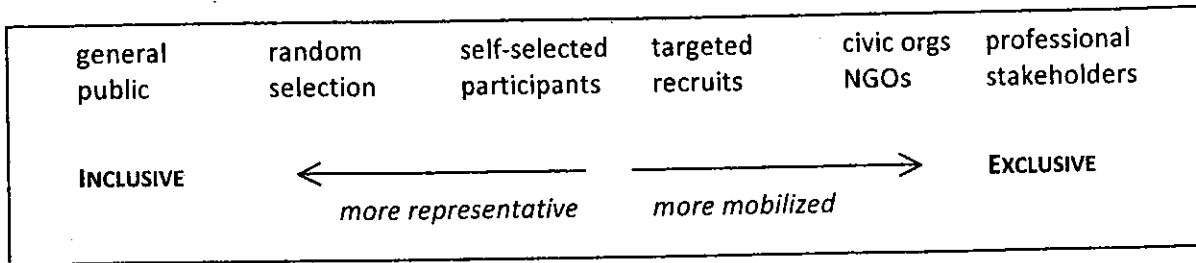
These critical dimensions, I argue, must be situated in a proper understanding of power and empowerment. In sum, this framework does not educe a single best optimum of a mobilized public will and activated citizenry. Rather, its chief aim is to map out a terrain of possibly constructed publics, their inputs and their influence for a given social accountability mechanism.

### **Defining Publics**

The first critical dimension of public opinion is defining which public is the target of mobilization and activation. That is, for a given social accountability mechanism, who can be engaged and who do we want to engage? In an Aristotelian realm where the ideals of citizenship are indissoluble from the ends of human development, the answer would be "everybody." This of course is an impractical ideal. Hewing to a narrow, minimalist conception of citizen participation – the franchise – voter turnout rates are strikingly variable across national contexts, and dismayingly low in countries that purport to have deep participatory roots. In the United States and Switzerland, two countries with proprietary claims on the origins of democracy, voter turnout rates hover just around 50 percent. In India, the most populous democracy in the world today, it inches barely several percentage points higher. Universal participation is also impractical in the specific context of generating genuine inputs into social accountability mechanisms because such ubiquitous levels of citizen activism would almost sure overwhelm institutional capacity and foster bargaining and coordination problems in heterogeneous publics.

At the other polar extreme to universal participation would be a form of oligarchy or clientelism, where only those few and well-connected individuals who stand directly and materially to gain from being politically active will do so. Going to this extreme ensures a very high degree of personal commitment and investment among any participants. It also, however, gives us little hope for a sanguine view of genuine

“bottom-up” inputs to social accountability mechanisms. The outcome of any participatory process under these circumstances, much like in a “stacked jury,” would be a foregone conclusion. Furthermore, the outcome would likely be at great odds from the desires and interests of the general public.



In between the two extremes, however, is a capacious range of “publics” in which participation is selective yet sufficiently representative of *something* to engender a meaningful sense of accountability. The “public” may be self-selected (anyone wishing to participate doing so), recruited selectively (e.g., recruiting usually quiescent groups like the poor or religious and ethnic minorities), recruited through a random selection process (e.g., in citizen juries, deliberative experiments, opinion polls), or it may even be organized entities (either in civil society – e.g., churches, school councils, hometown associations, soccer clubs – or in the interest groups/lobbying professions; either as direct stakeholders or as agents of un- or underrepresented constituencies).

Thus one key design element to mobilizing public will is specifying how inclusive or exclusive participation needs to be to serve the ends of accountability vis-à-vis elite decision-makers. As the arrows in the schematic above indicate, as a general pattern there is also likely a trade-off between how representative a public is and how staunch and easily mobilized they are. A critical point here is that there is no *one* ideal standpoint on which public is best suited to mobilize. Rather, there is a menu of possible publics to activate, depending on the particular institutional design elements of a given social accountability mechanism and on a given political context – e.g., organizational resources, social movement repertoires, strategic communication frames, political opportunity structures, external audiences, and the like.

One additional point to make on properly recognizing which “public” is or ought to be mobilized on a given issue, via a given social accountability mechanism, is that the term “citizen” too has important shades of distinction. At the national level, following T.H. Marshall’s still useful categorization, there is a great deal of variance across boundaries in the development of civil, political, and social rights. Even as a legal status, not all citizens are equal and full members of a polity. Numerous examples abound in the U.S. context, for example. Looking back through history, men exclusive of the landed gentry, all women, indigenous peoples, immigrants from Asia, colonized Mexicans, forced migrants from Africa, adults younger than 21 years of age, and so on have either been conferred citizenship with limited rights and privileges or denied citizenship altogether. Looking to the present, citizenship in the U.S. continues to be

incomplete and unequal for convicted felons (who, in most states, can no longer vote), gay and lesbian couples (who, in most states, are not recognized as a legal union), unauthorized migrants (who, in many states, have no access to basic social rights), under-aged minors (who can sire and mother children, but cannot vote), and so on with the mentally ill, indigenous peoples, homeless, and other marginalized groups.

Above the national level, as Yasmin Soysal, Rainier Bauböck, Aihwa Ong, and others argue, citizenship is also increasingly “denationalized.” This is especially so in the European Union context, where the legal status of citizenship extends into multiple nation-states (so too for immigrants who naturalize in countries that allow for dual-citizenship arrangements). Even beyond the EU and the legal basis of citizenship, the political basis of citizenship activism – where in the civic republican tradition, citizenship “is not just a means to being free; it is the way of being free itself” (Hannah Arendt) – is increasingly local (sub-national) and transnational. Moreover, newly inscribed ends of justice like “capabilities” and “human security” are theorized explicitly across borders.

In this sense, citizenship is an important textured layer to our dimension of participatory inclusion/exclusion. It is important because we must be careful not to rely on prefigured and valorized conceptions of “citizen” in bounding a target population of participants. Many of the most transformative social movements involve the demands for greater inclusion and full citizenship – take the recent examples of the explosive urban uprisings in the Paris banlieue and beyond in 2005, the immigrant protest marches across American cities in 2006, or the protests led by Burmese monks in Rangoon in 2007 – and we risk missing such critically transformative moments by sticking to one particular view.

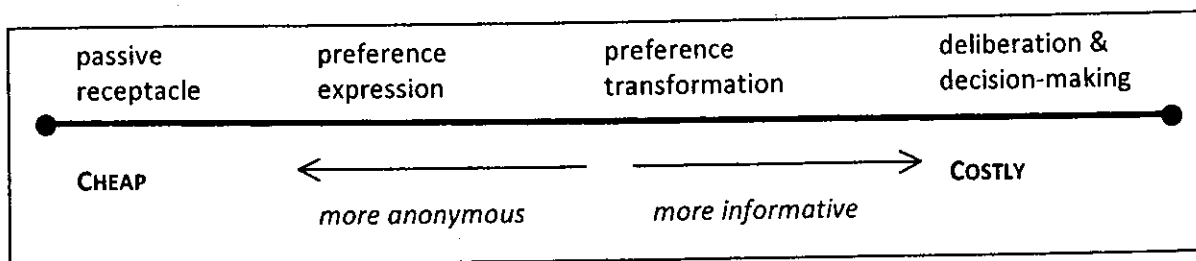
It is further important to keep in mind the varieties of citizenship because there are also varying understandings of what citizenship entails at the individual level. Some individuals may view their citizenship purely as a legal status – with accompanying rights (e.g., access to public services, legal counsel) and attendant privileges and obligations (e.g., jury duty, military service, electoral office). Others may find in this thin conception of citizenship a deep psychic release and freedom from fear – fear of political persecution, deportation, or other legally-justified sanction. And yet others may view their citizenship as a civic, republican virtue or as an aspiration to an ideal human form.

### **Modes of Public Expression**

Another critical dimension is what counts as evidence of public “will” and citizen “activism.” As we noted earlier, in contemporary, industrialized societies, the technologies of marketing consumption and surveying political preferences have developed to the point where many scholarly and practical responses to the question, “what does the public want?” or “what is the public willing to fight for?” start and end with the opinion poll. There are some good reasons for this reliance on a randomly sampled, but putatively representative public. There are also myriad reasons to be cautious, if not critical of this reliance. For the present, I skirt this nettle tree save for returning to the observation that there is a remarkable diversity of modes of public

expression beyond the opinion poll. Among the social accountability mechanisms discussed in this volume, public expenditure tracking and citizen report cards rely on surveys, while community scorecards allow for focus groups and public meetings and participatory budgeting allows for direct and deliberative decision-making.

Across these multiple modes of public political expression, each counts as evidence of the public's will in varying degrees, conditioned on who the "public" is and how much "will" is in evidence. Here again, I want to emphasize that there is a range of possible participatory inputs. At one end of the spectrum is the idealized Athenian forum or New England town hall meeting that is part of our political myths, where we directly do the work of politics. Participatory budgeting and Local Health Councils in Brazil aim, in the main, for this ideal. At the opposite end are very passive forms of input – viewing a political debate on the television, attending a public informational meeting, listening to a petitioner on the street.



As the schematic representation of the varieties of participatory input above shows, in between passive consumption of political information and active deliberation and collective decision-making is a range of modes of participation that enable individuals to voice their political will and – to the extent that preferences are sometimes endogenous to participation as the "new social movements" literature on identity formation suggests – even allow for the transformation and empowerment of that will. In the representation above, the spectrum ranges from cheap to costly modes of participation.

In parallel with the costs of participation is a spectrum that varies in how informative participation is to elite decision-makers (watching a televised debate in one's flat conveys little information beyond aggregate media market share; engaging in civil disobedience or partaking in a participatory budgeting exercise conveys a great deal about what citizens want and how intensely they want it). Also in parallel with the cost dimension is the level of publicity/anonymity for a given mode of participation. In more authoritarian states, inspiring people to come out of their closets and express their political will publicly may be a very high threshold indeed.

### Power and Empowerment

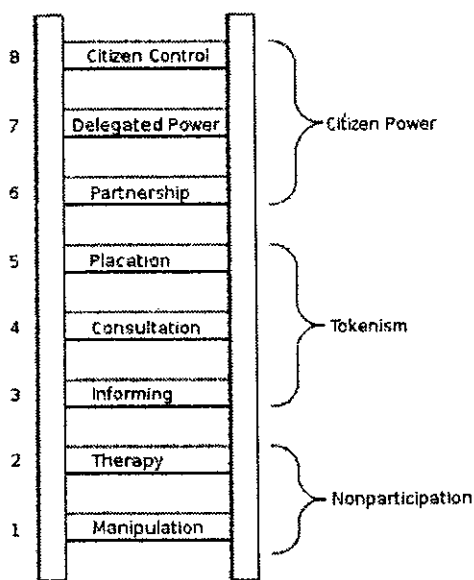
In choosing between modes of mobilizing public inputs to a given social accountability mechanisms, such factors are critical to consider. They demand careful answers to questions like "How much information do we need (or, can we handle)?" and



“Will we put participants in harm’s way by inviting modes of participation that a ruling regime will not tolerate?” They also push us toward a third key dimension that ought to be part of any discussion of institutional design – namely, the kind of influence we seek from citizens. Ruling elites (especially local and national elites) are often only interested in their citizens’ viewpoints to the extent that it allows them to manage the potential for dissent. Viewed from the participants’ standpoint, activism in itself is often no impetus to social change or political accountability.

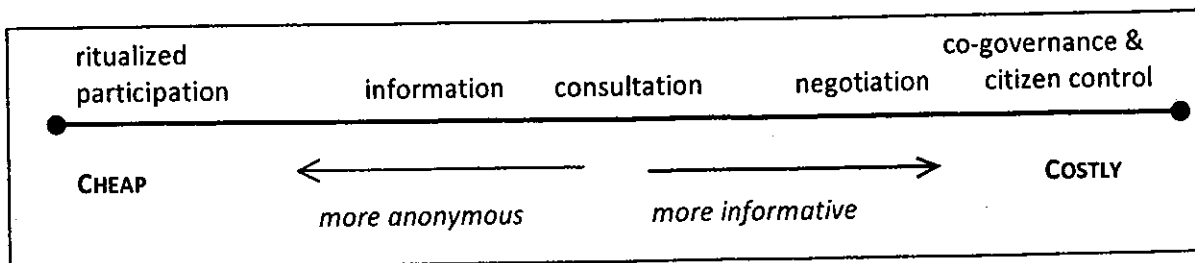
What then is the range of ways that participatory inputs could influence or constitute governance? Here Sherry Arnstein’s classic 1969 essay, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” is a useful point of departure. Arnstein describes an eight-runged ladder ranging from “the empty ritual of participation” to “real power needed to affect the outcome.” Thus at the lowest rungs are participatory inputs that are either staged to

mimic genuine inputs (“manipulation”) or appease a public that might be mobilized with breads and circuses (“therapy”). In the middle are what Arnstein sees as forms of “tokenism” that allow the public to voice their demands, but with no guarantee that they will be heard or that those in power will be held accountable for turning a deaf ear. Then at the very top are levels of citizen influence and power that allow for varying degrees of direct decision-making.

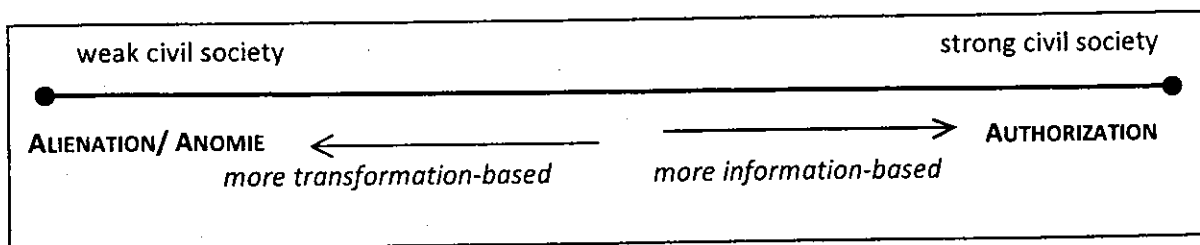


This schematic helps to temper the credulous devotion of some to participation for its own sake. Not all modes of participation are equal. In Arnstein’s scheme – adapted and redefined below – modes of participation like citizen control and

negotiated forms of power-sharing are more informative to state actors. But they are also far more costly to achieve: state actors have to concede a great deal of their authority to make it happen and citizens have to risk the swift and sometimes arbitrary hand of repression. If only citizen-elite partnerships or direct citizen control count as real power, this is too high of a barrier to entry for most elite decision-makers in most political contexts. A willingness to hear out the public and be held accountable to them is one thing, but sharing power or ceding it altogether is an entirely different matter. Moreover the dichotomy between citizens and elites (the ruled and their rulers) itself blurs into oblivion the higher one moves up this ladder of participation and, from the perspective of the ruling elite, there is no guarantee that a citizenry with genuine power can be so easily ratcheted down once it is mobilized. Frederick Douglass puts the point well: “power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”



This variation in power-sharing brings us to a final critical dimension of public opinion. Not all individuals in a society feel equally empowered or authorized to speak their minds on political matters. That is, there is a range from anomie or alienation to full authorization. Some individuals might opt out of politics as a result of their psychic estrangement or sense of being controlled and exploited. Others might be unincorporated because they are not socialized into the customs, norms, and civic education that habituate and authorize the sphere of political action. Yet others, whether by trait of personality, familial socialization, social network position, or some other factor, feel fully authorized to speak their mind on political matters.



As John Gaventa powerfully recounts in his study of an Appalachian mining community, grievance and exploitation all-too often is accompanied by quiescence, not rebellion. Gaventa explains this failure of mobilized public demands by defining three faces of power that are illuminating. In the first face, power is manifest through direct and observable decision-making, with powerful winners and powerless losers. In the second face, power is visible through agenda-setting, with some issues making their way to a decision and others left off the agenda altogether. In the third face, power is invisible and seen only indirectly in subjective states of mind – for example, in how the underprivileged often choose to understand their own situation by attributing blame to their own individual motivational deficits, rather than structural dynamics that serve to exploit their labor or corrupt their politicians.

This view of power gives insight into the range of subjective understandings that individuals bring to the construction of "public opinion." In cases where power seeps down to the third face, public opinion cannot be a generative force for accountability without transformation of that consciousness and belief system itself. When power is contested primarily in the first face, among individuals in society who feel equally authorized to be political beings irrespective of their material circumstances, the battle over public opinion is more dependent on having access to information and using that

information to foster collective action. The states of alienation and anomie that prevail in the third face are likelier to be sustained in more repressive political regimes and under conditions of weak civil society, while publics that feel authorized to demand accountability are likelier to coalesce in more democratic regimes and under conditions of strong civil society.

It is important here to note that many social accountability mechanisms like citizen scorecards and right-to-information legislation are information-based and geared to mobilize already authorized publics to voice their political viewpoints. They are less well designed to transform and activate publics that are, in Paulo Friere's term, engaged in a "culture of silence." By contrast, more directly participatory mechanisms of social accountability have the potential to break the cycle of quiescence by galvanizing the powerless to engage in self-determinative acts and reflect upon them. In this sense, social accountability mechanisms need to consider power not just in the conventional terms of "power-over," as in a state's power over its subjects. Rather, they need also to take seriously more processual and collective conceptions of "power-to" and "power-with," as in citizens' power to work with one another to collectively demand change, responsiveness, and accountability.