

ing room. It is not known to what extent, if any, Bush shares Roosevelt's belief that "civilized" nations should somehow control the "uncivilized."

In any case, none of this adds up to Hatcher's conception of elite "suicide." There has been change

in the foreign-policy elite involving differences in training and background, but it is questionable whether there has been a decline or even whether foreign policy itself has been all that much affected. Finally, after victory in the Persian Gulf, George Bush's claim to have

"kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all" eliminates what had been the prime cause of the alleged elite "suicide." George Bush is a true heir to the Theodore Roosevelt, Root, Stimson, and Acheson tradition, which is now in place in the State Department.

## The Pollster & the Nazis

Leo Bogart

How do we come to form our views, individually and collectively? This question bemused ancient philosophers, and continues to fascinate contemporary students of public opinion. In the last few years, no theory on this topic has been more widely discussed than that of the "spiral of silence," advanced in a book by that name, subtitled "Public Opinion—Our Social Skin," by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann-Maier-Leibnitz.\* The author is Germany's leading pollster, a prominent adviser to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and the 1990 winner of the Helen Dinerman Award (for outstanding contributions to research methodology) of the World Association for Public Opinion Research. Her book, originally published in Germany in 1980, has just appeared there in a new edition.

Noelle's thesis is that public opinion tends to conform to whatever is generally supposed to be the majority view on an issue, since those who already hold that view feel comfortable in expressing it, while those who think otherwise

are reluctant to speak up. This same hypothesis was advanced in 1968 by Gary Schulman, but he unfortunately neglected to give it a memorable label, and has not won any awards for it. The "bandwagon effect" is, in fact, a long-familiar and much-studied phenomenon in public-opinion research.

Nevertheless, Noelle believes that most public-opinion research still ignores or minimizes the force of group pressure. "Fascinated by the ideal of the self-reliant, independent individual," she writes, "scholars have hardly noticed the existence of the isolated individual fearful of the opinion of his peers." To support this portrait of a public cowering in apprehension that its thoughts may be out of line with those of the majority, Noelle cites findings of surveys, conducted by her own *Institut fuer Demoskopie* at Allensbach/Bodensee, which show evidence of bandwagoning in the course of election campaigns.

In several other studies, Noelle has asked people about their willingness to express their views on a controversial subject to strangers in a train compartment who have already made their own opinions known; individuals who share the strangers' opinions more often say they would be willing to speak up

than those who do not. She also refers to the laboratory experiments of Solomon Asch, who found that people tend to modify their own perceptions (for example, of the comparative lengths of a series of lines) to accord with those of others (including confederates of the experimenter, planted in the group to distort the judgments of the experimental subjects). There is, she apparently believes, a deep-seated biological basis for this.

Though it has aroused considerable attention, the spiral-of-silence theory has not been convincingly corroborated. A 1988 survey of eleven countries on the likelihood of a nuclear war, for example, found no support for the hypothesis that people known to hold minority opinions are less willing to talk than others. A case history of the anti-Marcos revolt in the Philippines also came up with contradictory evidence.

In effect, Noelle makes no allowance for such perennial issues in public-opinion theory as the level of information people have on matters of public debate, their readiness to express opinions on subjects of varying controversy and sensitivity, the sense of personal

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\* University of Chicago Press (1984).

commitment or responsibility they bring to a subject, and the intensity with which they hold their opinions. Opinion researchers are highly aware that the answers they get depend on the wording, sequence, and context of the questions, and on the respondent's relation to the interviewer. It is incontrovertible that we all dissemble our views for reasons of social convenience and to avoid unnecessary hassles. Religion and politics may be banned at the dinner table, but there are appropriate forums where such delicate matters can be discussed freely and without inhibition.

Of course people like to be on the winning side, and generally rally behind the winner of a free election. Noelle says that people's views of who is winning or of what the public thinks are largely formed by journalists, and by the media generally. But media reports on public opinion today, in both Europe and the United States, are largely based on what the polls show—a point of which Noelle takes no notice.

The power of the polls to set benchmarks against which people can assess their own beliefs and inclinations represents a major shift in the way political leaders gauge public opinion, and has made many of them heavily dependent upon practitioners of that craft. Noelle herself has been called the "Pope" (*die Paebstin*) of German opinion research by the German weekly, *Der Spiegel*, which describes her relationship to Chancellor Kohl as follows: "Just as important [as her political counsel], she strengthens him in the conviction that he doesn't need to worry himself about intellectuals."

For anyone pondering the spiral-of-silence hypothesis, the most convincing demonstration of its validity would appear to be the reaction of Germans to the events that followed the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor in 1933. Although only 37 percent of the electorate had voted for the Nazis, the rest were intimidated into acquiescence, which was rapidly converted to active support. Although opinion surveys were not conducted un-

der the Nazis, confidential reports on the mood of the people were prepared by the Domestic News Service of the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*). This research was directed by SS-*Gruppenfuehrer* Otto Ohlendorf, who also had another job: as head of an *Einsatzgruppe* that murdered 90,000 people, he demonstrated how practice and theory could go hand in hand.

Any public-opinion analyst, especially a German one, must be especially concerned with the question of how a people that prided itself on its high level of civilization could be transformed within a few years into accomplices to unprecedented barbarities. But this question does not arise in Noelle's book. There are in fact only three passing references to the Nazi period. The first is especially worth noting:

Mobs based on timeless elements are typically aroused by instinctive reactions. . . . It is on this basis that the Nazi minister of propaganda Goebbels was able to mobilize a full stadium with his rallying call, Do you want to have total war?

At the time, however, Noelle wrote quite differently about Goebbels from the way she does in *The Spiral of Silence*. In her first book, a primer on American opinion and media research published in 1940, she quoted him with enthusiasm:

"The people [*das Volk*] will no longer be left to its own devices. . . . The people shall begin to think as a unit, to react as a unit and to place itself at the disposal of the government with complete sympathy."

To this Noelle added an interesting suggestion that remarkably prefigured today's use of polls to assist politicians in the manipulation of public opinion:

To fulfill these tasks, a reliable system of mass questioning would not only be valuable as a check on their effectiveness, but also as an aid to comprehending the true nature of the led, so that their always-threatening fear of schoolmasters would be eliminated and a fruitful relationship fostered between the leaders and the led.

Noelle then went on to contrast the role played by public opinion in America and in Germany. "In the great 'democracy' on the other side of the ocean," she wrote, "it [public opinion] has the function of a corporation whose millions of stockholders dictate the policy of the enterprise." In National Socialist Germany, on the other hand,

it seems to us rather as the body of the people [*Volkskoerper*], which receives its orders from the head and guarantees their accomplishment, so that through the working together of head and limbs, transcendent political and cultural values can be achieved. In one case public opinion rules; in the other it is led.

The 1940 volume that harbored these sophisticated thoughts has mysteriously disappeared from West German libraries, although it heads the list of the author's previous writings cited in the U.S. edition of *The Spiral of Silence*. This recent book cited the work of Walter Lippmann, but the designation "Jew" does not follow the mention of Lippmann's name as it does in her earlier work. Nor does the present volume contain sentiments like the following:

Since 1933, the Jews, who have monopolized a large part of America's intellectual life, have concentrated their demagogic capacities on anti-German agitation. . . . The treatment of the Jews in Germany is portrayed by the American press in a completely distorted manner.

The author had acquired her knowledge of the American scene as an exchange student in the U.S. in the years 1937-39. German exchange students at this time were selected under the rules of the National Socialist party Office for Foreign Politics, and the program was an important part of the propaganda apparatus. Noelle was picked on the basis of her superb credentials as an activist and leader of series of a Nazi youth and student organizations.\* Of the many

\* Richard Albrecht, a German journalist, has recently uncovered a list of these affiliations and also led me to the article in *Das Reich* discussed on p. 49.

young people who came to the United States under this program, she was singled out for special mention in an American wartime study of the program's operations.

Noelle has explained away her early Nazi utterances and connections as a necessary expedient required to win her coveted trip abroad; she once pointed out that "I never knew Goebbels personally." But her activities as a propagandist for Nazism continued for years after this initial student phase.

Returning to Germany from the U.S. via Japan and the Siberian railroad, Noelle embarked on a career as a journalist. She found employment with *Das Reich*, a slick weekly newspaper for which Goebbels personally wrote editorials. Aimed at intellectuals, the journal carried articles on music, theater, and such cultural items as the "German baroque" cupolas of churches in parts of Poland that had already been incorporated into the Third Reich.

On June 8, 1941 (two weeks before the invasion of the Soviet Union), *Das Reich* carried a two-page spread under the heading, "Who Informs America?" in which Noelle drew on her observations of this country. The sources of American public opinion—the press, radio, and movie newsreels—were, she wrote, in the hands of individuals obsessed with hatred of Germany. Leading the pro-Allied interventionist pack were such columnists as Dorothy Thompson and General Hugh Johnson ("a friend of the Jew Bernard Baruch"). There were a few noble exceptions, like Westbrook Pegler ("a son of the Middle West with Mark Twainlike features")—though it was nowhere indicated that his column was distributed by what Noelle referred to elsewhere as "the Jew-loving Scripps-Howard concern."

Illustrating the article was a cartoon from the *Chicago Daily News*, about which Noelle had this to say:

In gruesome distortion, symbols of National Socialism and signs of death are bound together. To grasp suddenly in the dark for the Jew who must be hiding himself behind the *Chicago Daily News* means sticking one's hand into a wasp's nest. When one gets forty stings at the same time, one stops being interested in a single wasp. Jews write in the newspapers, own them, have virtually monopolized the advertising agencies and can therefore open or shut the gates of advertising income to individual newspapers as they wish. They control the film industry, own the biggest radio stations and all the theaters.

There is no need to trace the thread that connects these words to the broken shop windows and burning synagogues of *Kristallnacht*—already two years in the past when the words were written—or to the millions of individual acts of sadism and murder that made up the Nazi war against the Jews.

SOON after the war, Noelle surfaced in Freiburg, where she worked for French military intelligence. The U.S. Counter-Intelligence Corps became interested in her when she claimed to be working for American agents in Wiesbaden, and found, when they arrested her, that she had purloined British intelligence documents, marked *Secret*, in her purse. In 1949, after establishing her research institute, she released a report that observed, "The greatest objection that is expressed against National Socialism puts the accent on the handling of the Jewish Question." Of late, Noelle has been conducting polls asking Germans whether the Jews have "too much influence in this country," too little, or the right amount.

On her frequent return visits to the United States in the decades since the war, Noelle seems to have gone out of her way to cultivate the acquaintance and professional collaboration of distinguished Jewish colleagues. Most of them have been

vaguely aware of her Nazi past, but willing to overlook it.

Clearly, at this point in her career, Noelle is well beyond the possibility of destruction. Her record is surely no worse than that of millions of other Germans and Austrians who were caught up in the fever of the Hitler period and want nothing more than for the past to be forgotten. But Noelle is, after all, writing precisely about the phenomenon that she personally experienced and witnessed. In *The Spiral of Silence*, she refers to the studies of the late Stanley Milgram, who tested the limits to which people would go in inflicting (simulated) pain in response to the instructions of an experimenter. Milgram replicated some of his original work in France and Norway, and Noelle suggests that he "transferred his experiments to Europe because the suspicion had arisen that conforming behavior such as Solomon Asch had established was perhaps an American peculiarity." This is a remarkable statement, since Milgram's research was prompted by a zeal to understand how vast numbers of ordinary Germans were driven to participate in the crimes of the Nazi regime.

Long before the appearance in 1950 of *The God That Failed*, ex-Communists were freely acknowledging their former sins and analyzing the psychological processes that brought them about. Even the Nazi war criminal Albert Speer, reflecting in prison, tried to explain his motives for thinking and behaving as he had done. Should one expect anything less from a professor of communication at a major university (Mainz) and a visiting professor at the University of Chicago?

Noelle's latest book, like her first, is more of a footnote to the history of Nazism than to the study of public opinion. To express one's thoughts and feelings requires honesty and sometimes courage. To repress them and to deny the truth is to fall into a spiral of silence, though not the one she describes.