

# MANIPULATION IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE<sup>1</sup>

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The book *The conquest of public opinion: how discourse manipulates political choices*<sup>2</sup> has 192 pages with three chapters titled: “What’s public opinion?”<sup>3</sup>, “Manipulating public opinion”<sup>4</sup> and, finally, “Opinion crisis, democracy crisis: the symptoms of a postmodernity political crisis”<sup>5</sup> plus Introduction.

(1) “What’s public opinion?” is subdivided in (a) “A pre-requisite: how collective identity is built”<sup>6</sup>, (b) “From collective opinion to public opinion”<sup>7</sup>, (c) “The public opinion fabrication”<sup>8</sup>, (d) “A confusion to avoid: opinion is not the electorate”<sup>9</sup> and (e) “Citizen consciousness: The difficult paradox”<sup>10</sup>.

(2) “Manipulation of public opinion” includes: (a) “Manipulation in the political world”<sup>11</sup>, (b) “Manipulation in the media world”<sup>12</sup> e (c) “Conclusion”<sup>13</sup>.

(3) “The crisis of opinion, crisis of democracy: the symptoms of a political postmodernity crisis”, deals with the following issues: (a) “The question of sovereignty in a democratic regime”<sup>14</sup>, (b) “The issue of counterpower”<sup>15</sup>, (c) “The reasons for

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<sup>1</sup> Review work: CHARAUDEAU, P. **A conquista da opinião pública**: como o discurso manipula as escolhas políticas. Translation: Angela M. S. Corrêa. São Paulo: Contexto, 2016. 192 p.

<sup>2</sup> In the original: “*A conquista da opinião pública: como o discurso manipula as escolhas políticas.*”

<sup>3</sup> In the original: “*O que é a opinião pública?*”

<sup>4</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação da opinião pública.*”

<sup>5</sup> In the original: “*Crise da opinião, crise da democracia: os sintomas de uma crise política da pós-modernidade.*”

<sup>6</sup> In the original: “*Um pré-requisito: como se constrói a identidade coletiva.*”

<sup>7</sup> In the original: “*Da opinião coletiva à opinião pública.*”

<sup>8</sup> In the original: “*A fabricação da opinião pública.*”

<sup>9</sup> In the original: “*Uma confusão a evitar: a opinião não é o eleitorado.*”

<sup>10</sup> In the original: “*A consciência cidadã: O difícil paradoxo.*”

<sup>11</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação no mundo político.*”

<sup>12</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação no mundo midiático.*”

<sup>13</sup> In the original: “*Conclusão.*”

<sup>14</sup> In the original: “*A questão da soberania num regime democrático.*”

<sup>15</sup> In the original: “*A questão do contrapoder.*”

a political crisis of postmodernity”<sup>16</sup>, and (d) “Between democracy of opinion and participatory democracy”<sup>17</sup>.

The way the author explains complex concepts that surround the construction of public opinion, through accessible language, even to beginners to the subject, plus examples (mostly French) of the current world is what provides fluent reading and easy understanding of the work.

On the other hand, for the researchers - both in discourse analysis and in other areas such as sociology, politics and communication - the book shows and clarifies the implicit contents that lie in the text, a fact that contributes to the persuasive process of discourse.

The first chapter – “What is public opinion?” — reports the construction of collective identity, which is what Rimbaud (2009) summarized in I is someone else, i.e., I only exist because there is someone else that is different from me. A group is constructed according to social factors (e.g., the place we occupy and the roles we play) and cultural factors (e.g., life practices of group members; representations that make the world).

Collective identity is fragile and must be constantly defended (differentiation process). In this process of construction, there are groups that isolate themselves; groups that dominate other groups (attempt of assimilation). Assimilation (or integration) can be verified, for example, in the case of immigration as seen by the host country, which will require it in exchange for the entry permit.

An opinion is a personal or collective judgment, an assessment, that an individual makes about the beings or events of the world and is, therefore, subjective and relative. The same does not happen with the knowledges of belief, which encompass objective explanations.

At the time of enunciation, there is no collective word (a choir, for example, to utter the same word), but an individual who pronounces it and who wants his/her opinion shared. Once shared, the opinion could be considered true. Collective opinions are not, therefore, the sum of individual opinions, just as the identity of a group is not the sum of individual identities.

Public opinion needs motives: events that present themselves to it and to the group that supports it (politicians, opinion polls, media), and emerges by reaction of individuals in situations they deem unsustainable. Thus, for public opinion to manifest itself, it is necessary to emerge an event likely to sensitize many individuals. An event that causes problems and that is not resolved. Charaudeau warns for confusion to be avoided: opinion with electorate. He deals with several events that have shaken the French public opinion and ends the chapter with the difficult paradox surrounding citizen consciousness. For him, it is necessary to distinguish between identity belonging and identity feeling: one belongs to a group because of one’s social identity of age, sex,

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<sup>16</sup> In the original: “*As razões de uma crise política da pós-modernidade.*”

<sup>17</sup> In the original: “*Entre democracia de opinião e democracia participativa.*”

family environment, etc. The feeling of identity comes from an idealization; it constructs itself subjectively in reference to a group in which we wish to recognize ourselves, to which we attach ourselves through beliefs. Citizen consciousness is “a condensate of wanting to be together and of wanting to live together and is of symbolic order.” (CHARAUDEAU, 2016, p.63, our translation)<sup>18</sup>.

In the second chapter – “The manipulation of public opinion” – the author deals with the manipulation of public opinion in the political world that can be done by manipulating discourse through seduction. To this end, Charaudeau asserts that a charismatic leader tends to manipulate public opinion more easily and specifies some types of charisma, such as the Messianic charisma that, according to Max Weber, is related to the gift of grace. For Weber (2003), unlike most experts in the subject, merit should not be given to the type of charisma itself, but to its domination and its effects. In a more sociological and historical line of reasoning, Weber sees the charismatic domination as the essence to understand these phenomena without necessarily dwelling on the substance, or element, that makes a figure a leader in counterpoint to his proselytes. Although primarily focused on the charismatic individual, Weber’s attention is also drawn to the relationship of the individual with the collective, since only through the recognition of the follower, and even of the community in which s/he lives, the existence of charisma is formed. The referred gift of grace is not necessarily of divine order; it can be an inner force. In the case of the political actor, Charaudeau cites Christ as an example of someone who had the Kantian duty of the type do what you should, as well as figures less related to religion, as the case of General Charles De Gaulle, who, according to the author, was endowed with such grandeur that he had the mission to save France.

There are, in the author’s opinion, other charismatic leaders such as those who have explored the founding roots of a people, calling for revolt as Hugo Chaves did in his speeches when referring to Simon Bolivar and to the trees of the three roots.<sup>19</sup>

Another type of charisma, to which Charaudeau refers, is the Caesarist charisma, which is related to the ethos of power that can be expressed through different figures. They are apparently figures of exaggerated virility and may even be expressed by sexual adventures as was the case of former US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and former Italian President Silvio Berlusconi. There are also energy figures, which are manifested by hyperactivity as happened with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. However, there is an ethos less related to power, but more related to courage, as can be seen in the speech of former Argentine President Juan Domingos Peron on Peronism. Charaudeau makes clear that the political charisma is of another nature in relation to the other types of charisma, for there seem to be two antagonistic forces that permeate this relation: on the one hand, there is power – an indeterminate place – but with a force of domination;

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<sup>18</sup> In the original: “*um condensado do querer estar juntos e do querer viver juntos e é de ordem simbólica.*” (CHARAUDEAU, 2016, p.63).

<sup>19</sup> Allusion to the historical figures Simón Bolívar, Simón Rodríguez and general Ezequiel Zamora.

on the other, a people – a somewhat amorphous global entity – without indefinable limits, but a supposed place of counter-power.

This same chapter, which starts with the subchapter “The Manipulation of the Political World”<sup>20</sup>, brings further subchapters on manipulation of public opinion entitled as: “The manipulation of the dramatization speech”, “The manipulation by the exaltation of values”, “The populist discourse as a recycling of the extremist discourses”, “Discourse as the scrambling factor of political oppositions”, “The manipulation in the media world”<sup>21</sup>.

In “The Manipulation of the Political World”<sup>22</sup>, Charaudeau presents an overview on politics and on political actors. It deals with the idea that the political word circulates in a public space and is subject to its restrictions, i.e., in this space, the exchanges occur not between individuals but between entities or collective instances, which are defined by means of statutes and social roles. It is in this political space that there are the two instances, mentioned by the author, which are the political and national instances.

The following is a subsection on manipulation by opinion polls, which is subdivided into: “Public opinion research which is a speech”, “Different types of opinion polls”, “A deforming mirror of society”, “Analysis of an opinion poll that causes complexity”, “A good example of manipulation”, and “Surveys shape public opinion”<sup>23</sup>, followed by a conclusion about manipulation.

In “The manipulation of the dramatization discourse”<sup>24</sup>, the author argues that political discourse, far from being an absolute truth, tries to challenge others by means of appeals to feelings and by making scenarios, as in a theatrical stage in which dramas and tragedies are presented in order to manipulate public opinion. This discourse may arouse a protest movement, such as some injustice causing indignation, and a state of anguish in public opinion. There are episodes in history in which this discourse is justified, for example, military interventions in foreign countries where absolute enemies such as Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milošević and Osama Bin Laden were stigmatized.

Concerning the chapter “The manipulation by the exaltation of values”<sup>25</sup>, there is a subjective question to be thought which is the notion or the meaning of the term values. All the politicians declare they defend values of their nations, of democracy, of the republic, etc. However, the point is that certain values can be judged by the utility and good functioning of social life at a given time, and these values can be considered as

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<sup>20</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação do mundo político.*”

<sup>21</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação do discurso de dramatização, A manipulação pela exaltação de valores, O discurso populista como reciclagem dos discursos extremistas, O discurso como fator de embaralhamento das posições políticas e A manipulação no mundo midiático.*”

<sup>22</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação do mundo político.*”

<sup>23</sup> In the original: “*A pesquisa da opinião pública que é um discurso, Diferentes tipos de pesquisa de opinião, Um espelho deformante da sociedade, Análise de uma pesquisa de opinião que causa complexidade, Um bom exemplo de manipulação e As pesquisas formatam a opinião pública.*”

<sup>24</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação do discurso de dramatização.*”

<sup>25</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação pela exaltação de valores.*”

values that are obstacles to the performance of the economy and even social well-being, as Luis Fernando Veríssimo puts it ironically in his text called *Silogism*:

[...] Our stability and our prestige with the international financial community are due to the tenacity with which honest and capable men, resisting emotional appeals, maintain an economic policy firmly rooted in the misery of others and admirable coherence based on the hunger of others. The country is only viable if half of its population is not. (text published in O Globo, our translation)<sup>26</sup>

In this same paragraph, in *The populist discourse as a recycling of the extremist discourses*<sup>27</sup>, Charaudeau approaches the ideological French matrices of both right and left, in order to deal with the populist discourse as a recycling of the extremist discourses. Populist discourse, consistent with the dominant tradition in comparative political science, defines populism as a form of politics based on the “moral debasement of elites and the concomitant veneration of ordinary people” (KRIESI, 2004, p. 362). According to the author, populism is denounced as an antechamber of totalitarianism. He proclaims the victimization of a people, the exaltation of certain values of such people and the demonization of the guilty ones, made by the figure of the scapegoat. Populist discourse as a scrambling factor of political oppositions provides examples from history that have occurred in Europe as well as in Latin American, and in African or Eastern countries. For the author, populist discourse has a historical origin in the extreme right-wing, but can align, for strategic purposes, with the discourse of the extreme left-wing as well.

In this line of thought, left-wing populism seeks a strong state, with no market economy, but at the service of the people to whom it must redistribute wealth. Likewise, right-wing populism defends the less favored classes, but without state intervention. In the case of France, these classes are represented by a population of the agrarian interior, plus a small bourgeoisie of merchants and artisans. Left-wing populism, on the other hand, fights for the group of members of the so-called popular class as workers, proletarians and illegals. As enemies, right-wing populists have not only the establishment but also a hypothetical Communist-Socialist alliance. The enemies, in the case of left-wing populists, would be the so-called reactionary forces, named fascists at other times.

Titled “The manipulation in the media world”<sup>28</sup>, this part presents a subdivision that deals with a discourse feature that goes from the superdramatization of information to

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<sup>26</sup> In the original: “[...] *A nossa estabilidade e o nosso prestígio com a comunidade financeira internacional se devem à tenacidade com que homens honrados e capazes, resistindo a apelos emocionais, mantêm uma política econômica solidamente fundada na miséria alheia e uma admirável coerência baseada na fome dos outros. O país só é viável se metade da sua população não for.*” VERÍSSIMO, L. F. O Globo, 24/03/2000, citado pelos autores.

<sup>27</sup> In the original: “*O discurso populista como reciclagem dos discursos extremistas.*”

<sup>28</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação no mundo midiático.*”

the peopolisation of the politician. The strategy that politicians use to reach undecided voters through nonpolitical argumentation contributes both to personification and dominance of television advertising. In addition, “negative publicity in attacking opponents directs the attention of voters to the personal characteristics of the candidates with the most votes” (ANSOLABEHRE; IYENGAR, 1995, p.258). As consequence, personalities with greater intention of votes become the main motive of votes, to the detriment of political programs or campaign themes, having as a doubtful side-effect the celebration of politics, i.e., peopolisation. According to the author, peopolisation is distinguished from populism by having a discourse characteristic that deals with the private lives of the famous ones such as celebrities plus movie, sports, and art idols, etc. This is the matter of gossip magazines. This phenomenon is a double-edged sword, as it desacralizes the politician by getting her/him closer the voter, and by taking her/him off her/his pedestal, but resacralizes her/him “by introducing humanity to a function that, by definition, is dehumanized” (CHARAUDEAU, 2016, p.124, our translation)<sup>29</sup>.

Under the title “The manipulation by opinion surveys”<sup>30</sup>, Charaudeau analyzes the opinion polls stating that they are actually a type of discourse because, for him, polls are an act of language that brings, in its core, a set of questions and answers. In this way, opinion polls can induce a response, since, in general, every question imposes a scheme of speech in which the one who is asked is inserted. Also, one can think of the questioner as someone who wants to know something for a certain purpose.

The author makes a general survey of the various types of polls and argues that they can be a deforming mirror of society (author’s words), as they feed the electoral dramaturgy, i.e., allow political commentators, with their own ideologies, to comment the poll results within their own bias. Thus, polls can manipulate public opinion, since they are, in turn, acts of formatting a thought that does not know what it represents.

In sum, the author sees, in opinion polls, the lack of boundaries between legitimate persuasion strategies or the sampling of a scenario through research and the intent to manipulate minds.

Finally, in the third chapter – Opinion crisis, democracy crisis: the symptoms of a postmodernity political crisis – the author addresses the phenomena much discussed today, crises of opinion and democracy. In monarchic regimes, due to fact that power supposedly has a divine origin, the voice that represents a people acquires its sovereignty by an absolute regime of beliefs; nevertheless, in a democratic regime, “the voice comes from below, that is, from the public opinion” (CHARAUDEAU, 2016, p. 152, our translation<sup>31</sup>) and this is not always translated by the alignment between the public opinion and the representative(s) of that opinion. If we take as an example, among several instances that occurred in Brazilian politics, we can cite the case of the trial

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<sup>29</sup> In the original: “[...] *pelo fato de introduzir humanidade numa função que, por definição, é desumanizada*” (CHARAUDEAU, 2016, p.124).

<sup>30</sup> In the original: “*A manipulação pelas pesquisas de opinião.*”

<sup>31</sup> In the original: “[...] *a voz vem de baixo, ou seja, da opinião pública*” (CHARAUDEAU, 2016, p. 152).

that occurred in the House of Representatives in Brasilia, which exempted the current President of the Brazilian Republic, Michel Temer, from being investigated by the Federal Supreme Court (FSC) despite the fact that the vast majority of Brazilians, as revealed by some opinion polls, favors the authorization for the FSC to decide whether or not to settle a criminal case against the president.

Then one can read that the possible notions related to these crises of democracy and power as counterpower, which comes from the public opinion in the form of claims, are ignored.

According to Charaudeau, a full democracy without counterpower does not exist. The great democratic principle is that of the provisional delegation of the power of a people to a representative, who in theory will represent it in vital decisions that will strongly affect the life of this very same people. In this case, counterpower has an important role in regulating the sovereignty of a representative so that the policy of a country is not made only in the name of a majority or an active minority without any justification.

In *The conquest of public opinion: how discourse manipulates political choices*<sup>32</sup>, Charaudeau amplifies the ideas discussed here and makes his analysis about the construction of public opinion. He builds a discursive activity on how one can manipulate opinion polls. The book attempts to detail how the manipulative discourses occur, taking into account the processes of individual and collective identity construction brought to the surface by feelings, values, political theater, and charisma.

It is worth emphasizing the social importance of reading the book for those who want to think about the stratagems used for the conquest of public opinion and for the ones willing to understand the discursive strategies existing in the current historical moment. In democratic regimes, politicians are the ones who represent the voice of the people, but for them to come to power, they must use discourse to win over citizens. And it is through words that people seduce, persuade, manipulate, and regulate their social and political lives.

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<sup>32</sup> In the original: "*A conquista da opinião pública: como o discurso manipula as escolhas políticas.*"

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