

Public Service and Liberal Democracy

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Abstract

The debate on television's "public service" obligations can only make full sense if integrated in the broader context of the debate on the best political model for society.

In fact, the classic "public service" rationale is based in a normative conception of good and in a suspicious view of the average citizen that is largely tributary of a Platonic or Elitist approach to the political organization of society. The question is therefore to know if such a view is legitimate in a Liberal Democratic society.

Our understanding is that it is fundamentally incompatible the classic definition of a Liberal Democracy. In a Liberal Democracy, the individual is highly praised and

no specific conception of good is imposed to society, whereas in the Platonic Republic the philosopher king is in charge of defining such a normative view and of imposing it to the ignorant masses. The "Public service" doesn't have a place in the Jeffersonian Republic.

1 Public service in the context of a broader debate

To reflect upon the concept of "public service" is, in many ways, to reflect upon a political model for society. This is not to say that the extent of state or "public" intervention in the broadcasting industries wasn't deeply influenced by several non-political factors. The geography, the economic status and the linguistic, regional and cultural traditions of particular countries were some of those important factors. So were the specific social conditions in the early years of broadcasting: while most European countries were in the mid 20's, highly stratified societies, the United States were struggling to integrate, within a common cultural ground, the culturally heterogeneous immigrants arriving in massive waves. These differences were not to be without importance for the

future of broadcasting in those countries. Finally, spectrum scarcity and the consequent need for regulation and for the grant of specific allocations was another factor that made state intervention in the broadcasting industry almost obligatory. But, to some extent, those factors only served to support or deter two conflicting ideological approaches to the concept of public service.

The first is a Liberal approach, which, in its pure version is incompatible with the notion of public service. The second, and as we believe, the only behind the traditional notion of public service, is a Utopian, Elitist or Platonic orientation (in many cases not distant from Marxist schools of thought¹). The two visions are essentially epitomized in the so-called American and European (continental) models, and in many ways they are a reflection of two different interpretations of Democracy itself. The first approach cherishes the concepts of individual liberty and pluralism, and therefore refuses a normative project for society. The second, in many ways tributary of French rationalism and constructivism (and, paradoxically, also of Plato and Marx's utopianism), proposes a holist view of society, the existence of absolute common values, and places the notion of public service in the context of a broader project for society.

But although as we said, the two conflicting visions generally correspond to two alternative experiences, it seems more prudent to place the discussion of the status of "public service" in the realm of ideas rather than to try to exactly match these with specific

¹See Wolton, Dominique in "L'éloge du grand public" on the importance of the works of Marcuse, Adorno and the of the Frankfurt school in the shaping of the European television theory.

models. If, as we believe, the core of any argumentation in favor of "public service" can be related to a Platonic or Elitist framework, it seems impossible to deny that other contradicting influences contribute to shape each specific model. One obvious example is the problem of cataloguing the uniqueness of the British approach. In fact, if as we will see, Reith's original vision of "public service" can easily be called Elitist and Platonic, his thought is probably much more tributary of Puritanism than of Marxism. On the other side, the subsequent evolution of the BBC model until the consulate of Mrs. Thatcher seems to set it apart from its continental (and especially Latin) counterparts in terms of its less elitist approach to culture and of its independence from political intervention and design.

2 The classic “public service” rationale: Orwell, Bread and Circus

According to Dominique Wolton², two fundamental questions are on the origin of public television in post-war Europe:

"First the fear provoked by this new medium, even more frightening than radio in the sense that it added the image. A radio whose utilization made by the German and Italian fascists, not forgetting the distant echoes from Latin America, of its utilization in Brazil by Vargas and specially in Argentina by Peron, was still at that time in the mind of everyone. The mass media are therefore perceived as being dangerous and needing to be controlled by the public power. (...) At last, came the idea, defended by the

²Wolton, Dominique. *L'éloge du grand public*.

first television professionals, the politics and the cultivated elite in general, that television, if correctly used, could be a fantastic instrument of cultural democratization."

In fact, the use of radio before and during the war on one side, and the Orwellian imagery of an omnipresent Big Brother on the other side, seem to have largely contributed to overstate the power and the danger of the new medium. In the hands of a totalitarian government it has the power to achieve any Big Brother's vision of a conforming society. But even in the context of democratic societies, it is often said, television recreates reality, sets the political agenda, and, in a word, manipulates the viewers. It is a non-controlled power with a hidden agenda. And even if in more recent critiques the Orwellian imagery has given way to a more conspiratorial view of the power of big corporations³, the rationale remains the same: television power cannot go loose.

Another traditional accusation common to "public service" enthusiasts is one that states that television poorly serves the cause of culture. Cultural uniformity, lowering of taste standards, fragmentation of knowledge, are some of the its alleged effects. Mass culture, it is said, marginalizes, and ultimately condemns, every cultural production that doesn't appeal to the widest audiences. The taste of the greatest number is the new cultural paradigm. Beauty and the truth are defined in terms of mass appeal.

In Europe an additional and related problem is usually associated with television: the loss of cultural identities in detriment of foreign (e.g. American) cultural references that suit better the needs of a global culture

industry subject to the economic imperatives of commercialism. As Alain Minc⁴ puts it, "with television rightist and leftist extremists finally find a scapegoat for their anti-Americanism."

But paradoxically, television's potentially positive effects, either in politics and in culture, are frequently emphasized among those who defend a public intervention in television. Television is conceived as having the power to manipulate and alienate the viewer, but also as having, if properly used, the astonishing capacity to elevate and educate the masses. The evil, so it seems, can be turned into the good. The "public service" rationale is largely a consequence of this view. For those who – in a sadomasochist manner, to use Alain Minc's expression⁵ both fear and are attracted by the power of television, the belief that it has the messianic responsibility to use its power correctly is a logical consequence. Not to do so seems almost criminal. De Gaulle, who had learned the importance of radio during the occupation, always viewed television as the supreme means for diffusing the knowledge of French culture. Even Sarnoff, in the early years, compared the mission of television to that of a public library⁶, and Reith, the historic General Manager of BBC, viewed broadcasting as a "servant of culture". His words are elucidative of this line of thought:

"As we conceive it, our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every de-

⁴Minc, Alain. *Le media-choc*.

⁵Minc, Alain. *Le media-choc*.

⁶Bilby, Kenneth. *The General: David Sarnoff and the rise of the communications industry*.

³See Bagdikian, B.H. *The Media Monopoly*.

partment of human knowledge, endeavor and achievement."⁷

As we implied, there is obviously an enormous distance between Channel Four's original approach to a cultural policy and that of the esoteric French-German *Arte*. There is little in common between the independent statute of BBC and the highly manipulated Latin public channels. There is an abyssal difference between a public service financed by a tax on receivers, and a public channel supported directly both by governmental subsidies and commercial revenues. This is to say that there are unequivocally good and bad examples of "public service". But all seem to share an instrumental view of television's role in the bettering of society. The question is to know if that view is legitimate.

3 Plato's Republic

The problem behind the traditional concept of "public service", besides the fact it rests in an oversimplified understanding of television's effects ("it's not because everybody sees the same thing, that the same thing is seen by everybody")⁸, is its underlying assumptions. To state the legitimacy of public service in these terms supposes the existence of a "good" or "high" culture, or in a broader sense, a superior goal that every citizen should pursue, a normative conception of good. To state it in the messianic way we described, also supposes a particular view of the average citizen of our mass societies. One that denies him the capacity to define what is best for himself.

⁷Cited by Smith, Antony. *Television: an international history*.

⁸Wolton, Dominique. *L'éloge du grand public*.

Neither of these ideas is compatible with a genuine belief in liberal democracy. Both are tributaries of a Platonic vision of the ideal Republic. One deeply suspicious of democracy. One governed by the king philosopher that knows better what is best for the masses. One that clearly states a normative conception of good:

"In the world of knowledge, the essential Form of Good is the limit of our inquiries, and can barely be perceived; but, when perceived, we cannot help concluding that it is in every case the source of all that is bright and beautiful—in the visible world giving birth to light and its master, and in the intellectual world dispensing, immediately and with full authority, truth and reason—and that whosoever would act wisely, either in private or in public, must set this Form of Good before his eyes."⁹

Strangely enough, one Republic whose enlightened leadership was as suspicious of the average citizen capacities as, many years later, John Reith would confess to be:

"It seemed that I said dreadful things about the average man, his lack of intelligence and capacity; about parents not preparing their children for a definite career, sacrificing them to dead-end occupations for the sake of immediate wages; about lack of ambition; about lack of leadership; about rampant mediocrity. For public consumption I should certainly have put some things differently, but there was not much wrong with the content."¹⁰

⁹Plato. *The Republic*.

¹⁰John Reith cited in *Into the Wind*.

4 Jefferson's Republic

Liberal Democratic thought intrinsically opposes this view of the individual and of society. Liberal Democracies do not state imperative social goals of any kind. They are anchored in the principle of individual rights, not in the idea of absolute values. They are intrinsically non-foundational as clearly demonstrate the words of political philosopher Benjamin Barber:

"By my lights (...) it is the character of politics in general, and of democratic politics in particular, that it is precisely not a cognitive system concerned with *what* we know and *how* we know but a system of conduct concerned with what we will do together and how we agree on what we will to do. It is practical not speculative, about action rather than about truth. It yields but is not premised on an epistemology and in this sense is necessarily pragmatic. Where there is truth or certain knowledge there need be no politics (...). Democratic politics begin where certainty ends.

(...) Politically, we may define democracy as a regime/culture/civil society/government in which we make common decisions, choose common conduct or express common values in the practical domains of our lives in an ever-changing context of conflict of interests and competition for power – a setting, moreover, where there is no agreement on prior goods or certain knowledge about justice or right and where we must proceed on the premise of the base equality both of interests and of the interested."¹¹ In the same direction, British philosopher Bertrand Russel states:

¹¹Barber, Benjamin. *Foundationalism and Democracy in A Passion for Democracy*.

"The essence of the Liberal outlook lies not in *what* opinions are held; instead of being held dogmatically they are held tentatively, and with a consciousness that new evidence may at any moment lead to their abandonment."¹²

The non-foundationalism of Liberal Democracies is not, it is important to note, a synonym of nihilism. It doesn't deny the ultimate existence of truth. It simply restrains the state to dogmatically impose upon society one specific conception of good. This applies to the political as well as to the economical and cultural realms.

In a Liberal Democracy, moreover, the individual is highly praised. Liberal Democracy rests in the assumption that the individual has unalienable rights that are prior to the creation of the state. State itself is only created to secure those individual rights. Its only legitimacy comes from the consent of the governed. Individual freedom and individual natural rights are only to be limited when they interfere with someone else's. State intervention cannot be legitimated by any other reason. The individual is, in a sense, the hero of a Liberal Democracy.

5 A fundamental incompatibility

If we are correct in asserting that "public service" theory is based upon a normative conception of good and on a suspicious view of the common citizen (and therefore, let's not hide it, on a suspicious view of Democracy), it is therefore legitimate to conclude that it is incompatible with a liberal democratic ideal as we understand it.

Milton's marketplace of ideas from which

¹²Russel, Bertrand. *Philosophy and Politics*.

truth will ultimately arise has little in common with the king philosopher's dogmatic truth. The individual citizen, the center of the democratic regime, called to periodically elect his government and to state his will, has little in common with the fragile viewer who can't choose what is best for himself. In the words of Dominique Wolton:

"(...) it is difficult to simultaneously defend the importance of the sovereign people, the history's and democracy's actor, the hero of the universal suffrage, and to state that that same people is alienated and passive when it is turned into the mass public of television."¹³

But to state that the "public service" doesn't have a place in liberal democratic societies doesn't imply that liberal democratic societies can't have a policy for television. On the contrary, the existence of rules is central for the establishing of a liberal regime:

"All that makes existence valuable to any one depends on the enforcement of restraints upon the actions of other people."¹⁴

It seems therefore not only possible but also desirable, that a liberal state should establish a framework within which television is restrained to harm individual liberties. Laws that prevent defamation and damage to reputation, laws that assure privacy and peace of mind, laws that defend pluralism and the free expression of ideas (through anti-monopolistic regulations), are good examples of negative restraints imposed to television, and to the media in general, that are perfectly compatible with a liberal regime. But there is nevertheless an unsurpassable

distance between a negative restraint imposed to protect third party liberties, and a positive obligation to publicize and teach a dogmatic truth.

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¹³Wolton, Dominique. *L'éloge du grand public*.

¹⁴Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*.