

Greg Yudin, Moscow

## **Noelle-Neumann: Spiral of Silence**

Let me tell you a story about opinion polls.

The so-called spiral of silence has often been recalled recently in Russia in connection with public opinion polls. The idea behind the spiral of silence is simple. As soon as an opinion is conveyed either in the media or those selfsame surveys as having support from the majority, the minority, out of fear, prefers either to keep silent or join the majority. The idea has been used to explain where unanimous opinions, 86% ratings, total approval, etc., come from. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, the “godmother” of public opinion polling in post-war Germany, coined the term “spiral of silence” in 1980. And so in Russia, it is usually argued that the spiral of silence is an inherent feature of public opinion, because it was discovered in Germany, a proper bourgeois country.

We know that Noelle-Neumann was a Nazi. She did not join the party per se, but she did head a branch of a party student organization, made a considerable stir in the US by actively promoting Nazism, and later worked for two years at Goebbels’s weekly newspaper *Das Reich*.

But that is not so important. Many people suffered from Nazi fever, including social scientists. What is more interesting is that while many of those people somehow reflected on their Nazi experiences, trying in different ways to explain what had led them to do the things they did, Noelle-Neumann went into total denial. All her life, she maintained that she had done nothing extraordinary, that Hitler was a charming man, and that she had just been forced to denounce Jews, and in fact she had secretly opposed the regime. It is easy to see how she opposed it if you take a gander at the articles she wrote for *Das Reich*. It is as if a columnist for the current incarnation of *Izvestia* would say that he had secretly been fighting for peace and harmony in Russia.

Subsequently, the spiral of silence theory was repeatedly tested, and it turned out that it works poorly in multipolar societies. If it explains anything at all, however, it explains the personal experience of Noelle-Neumann herself. It is her own fear that she identifies with the intimidated majority. She tries to justify this fear by arguing that the spiral of silence is something ordinary and inevitable. But this is a bad excuse, because in order to save her conscience, she justifies political repression, not only past repression, but future repression. It is one thing to recognize that no normal person is immune from becoming a beast, and quite another thing to say it is a normal thing when people turn into animals.

In fact, as far back as her 1940 dissertation (which simultaneously functioned as a report to Goebbels's office on American attitudes to Germany), she writes directly about the difference between the US and the Third Reich.

“In Germany, public opinion figures like the body of the people, which receives orders from the head and ensures their implementation. [...] In one case, public opinion holds sway. In others, it is guided.”

All this came to mind after the stunning lecture last week by my colleague Grigory Kertman from the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM). Kertman spoke about the fear of respondents during interviews. It cannot be measured directly. You cannot ask respondents, “Are you afraid of me right now?” But Kertman cleverly got around this by collecting information from the interviewers who conduct the polls. He discovered that they are used to the fact that respondents are afraid: this is the most common cause of insincere responses. A significant part of the interview takes place in circumstances where the respondent's fear is so strong that it is palpable to the interviewers.

This silence of the lambs is abnormal, and it has nothing to do with the “nature of public opinion.” The insatiable desire to pass human beings off as naturally cowardly creatures and justify those who systematically bully them always comes from those who themselves have been victims of violence. Nothing good will come of it. We definitely do not want to go where this spiral would lead us.

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## About the author



Greg Yudin is a Professor of Political Philosophy at Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, and Senior Researcher at Laboratory for Studies in Economic Sociology at Higher School of Economics, Moscow.

He studies political theory of democracy with the special emphasis on public opinion polls as a technology of representation and governance in contemporary politics. In the past academic years, Yudin was invited to deliver several talks at various institutions. In 2019, he gave series of talks in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, all linked to his ongoing project *Politics of Polls: Theories and Practices of Plebiscitarian Democracy*.

Among his other interests are political and economic anthropology and philosophy of human and social sciences. He holds a PhD in Philosophy from Higher School of Economics, Moscow with a dissertation on Husserl's phenomenology of science. Currently he obtains a second PhD degree in Politics at The New School of Social Research in New York. His book *Public Opinion: The Power of Numbers* was published in Russian by The European University Press in 2020. He has also recently co-edited a special issue of the journal *Javnost (The Public)* on Russian public sphere (Issue 1, 2020).

He teaches political philosophy and social theory at Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences and Higher School of Economics (Moscow), and also contributes to major Russian media, such as Vedomosti and Republic.