THE MAKING OF PUBLIC SPACE

NEWS, EVENTS AND OPINIONS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Translated by
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polity

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Introduction

The subject of this book is the relationship between two sets of processes that make up the public space.[1] On the one hand, there are the processes of 'turning into current affairs' (*processus de mise en actualité*) which, seizing on what is happening now, make a large number of people aware of the existence of facts that they have not, for the most part, directly experienced, usually accompanied by a description and an interpretation. On the other hand, there are processes of *politicization*[2] which, seizing on facts made known by the process of turning into current affairs, problematize them, i.e. consider them as problems which concern anyone and thus also concern the state, while giving rise to interpretations whose divergences give rise to comments, discussions, polemics and divisions.

We will not start from a normative definition of 'public space' nor from the meanings that the term has taken on in the various political philosophies that have developed this idea[3] – whether constructively or critically. Instead, we will take it as it presents itself to the so-called 'ordinary' people who find themselves confronted with it, and we will adopt the kind of approach developed over the past few decades by pragmatic sociology. An important dimension of this approach consists in clarifying and articulating the implicit notions underlying the competences that people draw on in order to act, treating these competences as if they were historically and socially situated ontologies. In the case of the democratic public space, two aspects in particular must be taken into account. The first concerns the relationship between public space and what is called *news* (*actualité*). These days, the public space tends to merge with the many types of news about what is happening now, whether in a national political framework or elsewhere in the world – news whose constant presence has been intensified by digitalization: the most recent news con-

stantly adds to or replaces that which appeared a few days or hours earlier.

The second aspect, *politicization*, relates to the way in which politics manifests itself today in the public space, and thus to one of the modalities through which people who find themselves immersed in news also contribute to the functioning of the political sphere. We propose to approach politics, not as an essence – one of the meanings of the use of the word 'politics' or 'the political' (*le politique*) – but as a process, since it is mainly via the processes of politicization and the divisions they cause that politics becomes part of the public space and accompanies people's daily lives. The distinction between the process of turning into current affairs and the process of politicization, while necessary on an analytical level (not all news is politicized, and processes of politicization can form without being part of the news), also highlights their interactions. Within the immensity of what is happening, news focuses mainly on the areas of social life affected by the processes of politicization that, for their part, develop by taking from the news those cases likely to provide the raw material for these processes and to give them a concrete expression.

News as a global culture

The first part of this work is devoted to sketching *an ontology of contemporary actuality*, taking up a proposal by Michel Foucault in his commentary on Immanuel Kant's text in response to the question: 'What is Enlightenment?'[4] We are thus placing ourselves in a field that lies outside the sociology of the media, insofar as this studies the functioning and organization of the mechanisms of technical information and communication and the bodies on which they depend, and also outside the sociology of journalism (and journalists), insofar as this takes as its subject a profession and the characteristics or backgrounds of those who practise it. Under the term *news* we shall not, to begin with, include people or organizations, but multiple forms of knowledge concerning the world and what is happening in it. This news circulates between people without them having, in most cases, a direct personal experience of the events reported in the news. And yet, these multitudes actively contribute to ensuring the presence of these news events by echoing them and commenting on them in their conversations. News – in the sense in which we understand it here – can be seen as an environment within which almost all the members of our societies find themselves immersed, at almost the same time (even if there are

variations between groups and between individuals, in this respect as in others); and all, or nearly all, of these people also contribute to shaping and spreading it. In fact, what we have here is an artefact, one of those products of human activities that, in turn, imprint on those activities a certain shape, of which *cultures* (in social anthropology) are in a way the paradigm.

In the human sciences, from the outset, the reference to these various intermediate milieux known as 'cultures', including the notion of news, has played a role somewhat comparable to that which ancient physics assigned to the ether – the hypothetical fluid that was thought to act as a medium for the propagation of light waves. These milieux were considered, like language, to be indispensable interfaces for understanding the relationship between human beings, considered as singular individuals, and the ethnic or political entities to which they seemed necessarily to be linked; such milieux were thus also crucial for explaining the nature of social ties. However, while the idea of cultures has been designed to account for the differences between individuals, presumed to be similar, and thus to interpret the diversity of human groups, participation in the news seems to be an important factor of socialization in the age of a fraught globalization. Cultures are also distinguished from the news because of their different relationships to temporality. The notion of culture, originally devised by scholars belonging to societies whose self-consciousness was being transformed by a new sense of historicity, was an attempt to understand the so-called primitive or traditional societies that were presumed to lack a history; 'culture' was, thus, intended for universal and ahistorical use.

Conversely, the notion of news is – as we shall see – temporal through and through. Devoted to the staging of what is happening now, it relies on the very history of which it claims to be a moment, and moves into prediction and even prophecy. We will show, too, that news is associated with a form of sociality that, being itself part of the fabric of time, tends to see generation-based collectives as particularly important triggers of social and political differentiation. Finally, our analysis of the relationship between individual people, each immersed in the continuity of their lifeworlds, and the succession of different planes of news items, striking in their discontinuity, gave us an opportunity to place a certain attention to temporality at the heart of our analysis of social phenomena. This involved giving such an analysis a place that structuralist approaches certainly did not grant it – and that pragmatist approaches, although originally directed towards the analysis of processes, have tended to neglect.[5] Focusing on the news enables us to look again at the question of the event: it frees us from what has

become an entrenched contrast between, on the one hand, temporality, deemed to be too short to be 'true' of what presents itself *now*, in the *present*, in a way deemed 'superficial'; and, on the other hand, the 'long period', thought of as the period in which unfolds the silent but profound evolution of structures whose size is decisive.

In the second part of this work, we will move into the field of politics as it presents itself in a society in which the news occupies a very important place, as is especially the case in large states of a democratic cast, particularly when they are administered in a very centralized way – something that diminishes the role of local political activities and face-to-face situations. In fact, in contexts of this type, the functioning of politics relies largely on the votes of citizens who, in general, have only an indirect acquaintance with the people who aspire to occupy leading positions, or with the problems that these people will have to face. These individuals and these problems are known to most citizens only through the news, and it is therefore first and foremost in relation to the news that they react and act politically. One cannot overemphasize the number, frequency and diversity of cognitive procedures, judgements, utterances, links, reconciliations and arguments, likes and dislikes, etc., that never cease to affect people when they react to political news. This news, then, is always to be found at the interface between the governed and those who govern them, and it plays a driving role in the process of politicization.

One of the effects of politicization (which makes clear the political character of states of affairs that may not previously have been considered political), and of the inverse process of depoliticization (which denies that a certain state of affairs can be dependent on political decisions, or blurs the role of such decisions), is that they constantly modify the contours of politics by shifting the line that separates what lies within politics from what is external to it. Deciding what is, or is not, a political problem, and so what political differences and struggles are actually about, constitutes one of the major procedures of politics, entailing a certain relationship to the world, i.e. both a way of interpreting what is happening in it and a way of taking sides for or against decisions likely to modify it. If 'everything' were 'political' – a slogan that often accompanies processes of politicization and which, since the French Revolution, has constantly fostered the expectation of a 'total revolution'[6] – then nothing would lie outside politics; its specific nature would be obscured and politics would merge with social life. A processual approach shows that it is no more true to say that 'everything is social' than to affirm that 'everything is political'. But it nonetheless leads to the recognition that everything can be *politicized*, so that it

is primarily through its very plasticity that the influence of politics on lifeworlds makes itself evident.

The corpuses of data on which this work has focused

To analyse how people define themselves politically vis-à-vis the news of the day, we have drawn on the new possibilities made available by the introduction of spaces dedicated to gathering comments on online sites devoted to political news. This approach enabled us to take another look at the formation of what are called *political opinions* by grasping them outside of that stable, often self-conscious and cautious form associated with procedures such as interviews or sample surveys, which place respondents in situations they know to be artificial (albeit, here again, in a processual and, to some degree, evolving way). Rather, we have been able, in certain cases, to follow people in their uncertainties and their (apparent) contradictions when, carrying out what we have called *shifts*, they seek to articulate what they still think of as their 'convictions', rooted in past lived experiences, and the immediate reactions aroused in them by contact with the news – reactions that are often violent. We have thus sought to grasp the paradoxical place of news in the lifeworlds of individuals, where it occupies both a central role (if only in that everyone, or almost everyone, finds themselves immersed in it) and a peripheral role (at least in the sense that the news that attracts attention owes its salience precisely to the fact that it is distinguished from everyday experiences). The news often makes present to the lifeworld something that is, by nature, inaccessible.[7]

We have worked on two corpuses composed of comments posted online by so-called 'ordinary' people, relating to newspaper articles or past news videos, broadcast online, which these people have accessed via the Internet. Our main corpus, which relates to the news as it happens, is made up of approximately 120,000 comments addressed to the daily newspaper *Le Monde* by its online subscribers in September and October 2019. Approximately a sixth of these comments were rejected by the website's moderators and were therefore not put online, which makes it possible to compare, in relation to any given article, comments judged acceptable with those deemed to be unacceptable. The comments relate to various subjects addressed by *Le Monde* over those two months, which were not marked by exceptional or intrusive events – unlike the previous months, which had witnessed the crisis in France of the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests), and unlike the planetary pandemic of Covid-19 a few months later. The diversity of the events

on which comments were posted was an advantage for our research, allowing it to take into account a wide variety of facts and fields.

A secondary corpus is made up of comments posted on two video channels of past news, placed on YouTube in January 2021 by the National Audiovisual Institute (INA): INA Société (about 7,000 comments) and INA Politique (about 1,300 comments). This latter corpus made it possible, on the one hand, to access an audience that could be deemed different from that of *Le Monde*, particularly in terms of age and level of education, and, on the other hand, to compare, in relation to certain points (especially the relationship between generations), comments about the latest, 'newsiest' (as it were) news and comments about the news of yesteryear, that of the 'past', since these comments were posted by Internet users who had watched the rebroadcasting of news images archived by INA and dating back a few decades.

In both corpuses, the comments are of variable worth and are generally of short format (up to 1,000 characters for a post on *Le Monde*, whereas on Twitter the limit was originally set at 140 characters before being increased to 280 in 2017).

The empirical analysis of the politicization and formation of 'opinions'

The analysis of this kind of material presents a new challenge for the social sciences. To begin with, it is material that, insofar as it has been noticed at all, has generally been approached in a critical mode; we need to reflect on its problematization, in other words to discover and refine the concepts that will enable us to understand it. A pragmatic sociology that focuses on the media while limiting itself to the actions of journalists, mainly homing in on their professional errors as if they were 'grammatical errors', fails to grasp the actual topic of their work, namely the news. This topic also still largely awaits the development of innovative methods and tools of analysis, as well, perhaps, as a reflection on the specific kind of approach to the social world for which it seeks researchers. If we compare this material to what would have been provided by a questionnaire-based survey (the favourite instrument of classical sociology), we are struck by what may at first appear to be various shortcomings. One significant lack concerns the characteristics of identification – in the sense of ID – of the readers who posted the comments. We have no information concerning their age, gender, profession, level of education, etc., which constitute the basic criteria of a statistical study by questionnaire, even if some commentators provide

brief clues. Nor do we know their names, as the vast majority of them use pseudonyms.

As is often the case, however, this lack has encouraged us to set aside the explanatory routines of a classical sociology too eager to move directly from the so-called 'social' properties of actors to their utterances or actions – a process in which identitarian essentialism and behavioural essentialism confirm each other. Instead, we have developed other approaches which, drawing inspiration from pragmatics, emphasize the situations of utterance. This has also prompted us to attach great worth to events and to processes involving shifts; these concern both the substance of the news problems deemed to be urgent and the instruments (inseparably conceptual and political – the *polititheмes*, as it were) that people seize upon, or that themselves seize upon people (two possibilities between which the choice is ideological), when these people need to define themselves.

More profoundly, the way we have been led to discuss this topic has forced us to reflect on a construction that is at least implicitly present in most sociological approaches. It consists in distinguishing between a superficial stratum made up of facts succeeding each other in time – news items that are more or less ignored, or treated as if they were contingent and thereby evaded scientific analysis – and a deep stratum that is timeless or part of a period that resists change. This deep stratum can be formulated in terms of structures which, as we explained in our earlier book *Enrichment*,[8] can themselves be distinguished: there is a *social structuralism*, in which the deep stratum is deposited in social organizations, and a *cognitive structuralism*, in which the invariant structures of human interiority serve as a fixed point. We believe that one of the challenges facing sociology is to dissolve this contrast between strata, in order to take as its subject matter the flow of social and political life on different scales. To overcome this contrast, we need to break down the way in which people coexist and interact at a given moment when, being born and dying at different times, they have to deal with a plurality of periods – that of their lifeworld, that of the lifeworld of others, that of news and that of history itself – so as to achieve a *temporalized sociology*.

We have taken comments on the news seriously, viewing them both as the expression of singularities and as attempts to rise to a more general level, testifying to the way in which different actors, immersed in the temporality of their lifeworlds, strive to adjust to the news – i.e. to what, like others, they know only by hearsay. This possibility of momentarily detaching oneself from one's lifeworld in order to pay attention to what is inaccessible is a central way of coordinating with

others and thereby of 'being part of society'. We have combined two modes of reading these comments. Sometimes, to use Franco Moretti's terminology, we have resorted to a 'close reading'.[9] This is a reading which, especially in the German hermeneutic tradition, interprets the components of a text by bringing them closer to other components in the same text or by immersing them in a context made up of other texts in the same corpus. But we have also deployed what Moretti calls a 'distant reading'.[10] This latter takes up a large number of formally quite diverse texts and, in an almost Darwinian way, studies their temporal evolution and their spatial diffusion by factoring in the forces which intervene when they start to compete; this was Moretti's approach with literary genres. We have been able to make the best use of a possibility opened up to us by the file-processing software (Excel) in which our texts were archived, by isolating words that occupied a central place in the arguments developed, and by considering their frequency, especially depending on whether they appeared in texts posted online or in texts censored by the moderators.

Crowds, masses, networks

The empirical material on which our investigation rests is itself closely linked to news and politics, not only because it is generated by people's interest in these things but also because it can be related to a thematic constellation that has existed since the 1990s. This theme has, by developing and crystallizing, given rise to a process of politicization, and it now tends to appear, to a large number of actors (in particular, political decision-makers, journalists and lawyers), as a crucial social and political problem that political leaders need to address: that of digital *social networks* and the role they are deemed to play in the formation of public opinion and in the crisis affecting states whose political regime is representative democracy. These are states that (particularly in Europe and America) are threatened both by the multiplication and the dispersion of points of contention and by the risk of being overwhelmed by political forces geared towards their transformation into undemocratic political regimes.

Access to files containing texts sent spontaneously by people who are players in these two media (texts intended by their authors to be put online) was made possible both by *Le Monde* and by the National Audiovisual Institute. This gave us the opportunity to undertake research on the role of social networks and the Internet – an issue that, at least since the beginning of the twenty-first century, had

become central to the sociology of communication[11] (a field in which each of the two present authors had previously carried out work)[12] before being considered a force for the transformation of the main areas of social life – romantic and sexual relationships, education and relationships between adolescents, the economy (especially with the rise of the online economy), fraud (with online scams) and, above all, politics. It is commonplace today to observe that the Internet – which has become such a wide and changing space of communication that it is impossible to draw its limits – plays a considerable role in the political changes affecting many states, particularly Western democracies. Also, the possibilities of development this technology has offered to pre-existing practices viewed as belonging to the past or as marginal – for example, harmful accusations and rumours, the expression of hatred towards people and/or categories, conspiracy theories, destabilization tactics carried out by secret services, etc. – are so extensive that they jeopardize not only democracy as a political regime but also society as such.

While bearing in mind the reality of the social and political effects exerted by the Internet (in a similar way to previous technological innovations, such as the railway or the automobile, which led to the establishment of new apparatuses of control),[13] it is difficult not to see the structural affinities that make the current period, which can be called the *network moment*, similar to two earlier moments: the *crowd moment*, especially around the years 1870–1914; and the *mass moment*, especially around the years 1930–1970.[14] (By 'moment' we here mean a period during which a set of discourses and the practices associated with them manifest themselves with the greatest intensity.) In all three cases, a new actor is identified – crowd, mass, network – which, through its violent, blind and harmful action, threatens society and destroys the political structures that regulate it. In all three cases, a logic of gregarious association brings different people together by stripping them of their singularity, or rather of their personality, leading them to free themselves from the *superego* which, in the ordinary course of social life, goes hand in hand with the internalization of political taboos that limit transgression and crime and favour the minority's acceptance of the law when it expresses the will of a majority.[15] In all three cases, the choices of each individual as an autonomous person are absorbed into the horizontal logics of imitation and/or the vertical logics of suggestion or manipulation for the benefit of a leader – whether a political leader, an opinion leader, a gangster, a star or an influencer – capable of imposing their desire on those who follow them as if by hypnotism.

Finally, it needs to be said that the question of democracy lies at the heart of these three scenarios. The crowd moment owes much to the representations of revolutionary crowds staged by Hippolyte Taine in his *Origines de la France contemporaine* (*Origins of Contemporary France*, published in six volumes between 1875 and 1893), one of the main works that established the theme of 'national decadence'.[16] Gustave Le Bon, in his *The Crowd*,[17] drew inspiration from the descriptions of 'criminal crowds' he found in Taine, descriptions that were reused by contemporaries to interpret significant events that became news, starting with the Paris Commune followed by the strikes that spread widely at the end of the nineteenth century – movements that gave rise to riots when they were vigorously repressed.

The mass moment is associated above all with the rise of Fascism in Italy and then of National Socialism in Germany, before being associated, in the 1950s, with Stalinism in the USSR. These masses are made visible in spectacular public ceremonies and mobilized through radio programmes. A leader, by the power of his voice, reaches and seduces a plurality of followers who nevertheless remain isolated, whether they are placed side by side in a stadium, dressed identically and performing the same gestures together, or physically isolated at home but always beside themselves in thought – a state of estrangement from oneself and from the world that Hannah Arendt describes with the concept of 'loneliness'.[18] While the crowd is made up of bodies that physically approach each other until they mingle – just like the rumours, impulses, desires and hatreds of those who compose it, in a form of mimicry driven by a leader who uses the technique of hypnosis or suggestion – the mass is made up of separate individuals who, because of their absolute similarity and the new techniques of communication and control to which they are subjected, compose a single body. Yet this body encloses, permanently and in each individual, the capacities for hatred and destruction which, in the case of those who fostered the crowd moment, affected people only in those periods of collective madness when they indulged in the barbarity of the crowd.

Finally, in the network moment, people, who are no less deindividualized and depersonalized, are deprived even of a body. These people certainly exist, but only in the form of written traces and images, often accompanied by pseudonyms that give them a name as artefacts. One consequence is that the bodies which intertwine in the crowd, or which the mass accumulates side by side, gain their significance by weight of numbers: thus, the number of people who provide them with supporting voices, and who are mobilized by these forms (traces, images, etc.), is an important element in their political role, while the logic of the

network makes it possible to separate the number of interventions in networks from the number of people to whom these interventions are attributed. Those who influence the networks, whatever their number, can say and write anything, while limiting the risks. They do not have to face either the physical risks faced by crowds in a riot or the policing risks that threaten individuals who are depersonalized and separated from the mass. This gives networks, understood as agents (*actants*), an unprecedented violence, rapidity of reaction, malfeasance and robustness. A few individuals (we will never know who they are, or even what they want) – a few trolls who can be based anywhere (it makes little difference where), in troll factories or troll farms – are endowed with the capacity to make and unmake 'opinion' and to play havoc with all the instruments that maintain democratic stability, such as the electoral system, polls, and information provided by the media.

Democracy as it is

To interpret the role played by this construction in the moments of political anxiety that have, for over a century, arisen in connection with democracy, we perhaps need to return to one of the bases of classical political philosophy: the underlying distinction, articulated notably in Hobbes's 1651 work *Leviathan*,[19] between the social and the political realms. In this pessimistic anthropology, the social (described as a state of nature because it precedes the political which civilizes it, or at least keeps its barbarism under control) is, in isolation, doomed to self-destruction. Populated only by human beings consumed by envy, pride, hatred and other passions, it provides little chance for the social bond to be maintained, or even to be formed. Politics then designates the artefacts that human beings invent to manage to live together by binding themselves to each other in the name of entities other than human beings, entities to which they submit. One of these artefacts, democracy, has inspired great mistrust, especially since the French Revolution, which was supposed to establish it but which sank after a few years into what contemporaries felt was a regime of terror. Based on a principle of legitimacy that lies as close as possible to ordinary people themselves, and without relying on any external supports – texts, ancestors, blood, soil, God, whatever – democracy seems too similar to the social realm to have sufficient force to control the latter; and yet this is precisely the task with which politics is charged. Democracy depends on people's opinions and discussions and can even take advantage of their disagreements to bring out a common

good; it thus reveals that power is unfounded or, as Claude Lefort put it, rests on an 'empty place'.[20]

One may choose not to defend democracy on the grounds that it is powerless and unjust, or at least not to defend liberal democracy – deemed to be a 'fake' democracy – in the name of a real democracy yet to come, one that would be closer to direct democracy. One can also conclude – as several examples since the nineteenth century have shown – that the failings of the social order are such that it is completely inconsistent to think that it could be improved within the framework of a democracy, especially a liberal and representative one. Thus it becomes advisable to seek in the Revolution another model, either for setting up a constituent power or for dismissing the existing one, even if this means making use of violence (on the basis that revolutionary violence is simply responding to the violence hidden under the law of representative and liberal democracies). Our book, however, aims to describe as closely as possible some of the most recent changes in the representative liberal democracy in which we live, in the hope that this description will contribute to making democracy sufficiently robust and consistent for it to survive, while maintaining freedoms and imposing limits on contemporary capitalism in order to reduce inequalities. In other words, the survey-based sociological approach we draw on here will establish an analytical connection between news and politicization while also being guided by the normative aim of defending democracy, which, in our eyes, is under constant threat – a threat really close to us, in fact, in the Europe of today.

Crowds, masses and networks are viewed as embodying an unleashed state of the social that democracy, as a political regime, is unable to control. It follows, on this argument, that the defence of a democracy endangered by these three incarnations of the populace must necessarily involve a lowering of the bar when it comes to democratic principles, if not an at least provisional abandonment of them. First and foremost, what is abandoned is freedom of expression, so as to foster modes of government capable of re-establishing power on genuine authority, and on a belief sufficiently widely shared for it to confer on this power a force that will allow it to be exercised indefinitely and almost effortlessly, with the most infrequent and least visible demonstrations of force possible. We can perhaps compare this weary albeit blind dissatisfaction with democracy, leading to a preference ('just for now') for a more authoritarian and less liberal regime, with the attitude of a number of German intellectuals in the early 1930s, on both the right and the left, who did not move a finger to defend the Weimar Republic, as if it deserved nothing better than to sink without

trace.[21] As for the critique of democracy as it is, in the name of an 'authentic', perfect democracy which has never existed and thus is still to come,[22] it is doubtless – and more than those who voice it seem to think – anchored in the very formula of a political regime which has the peculiar feature of being constantly engaged in an interminable process of self-creation: such a regime brings to bear on itself a critical attitude whose expression it is more or less alone in tolerating.[23] Nevertheless, although its optimistic anthropology means that it is the exact opposite of any inclination to authoritarianism, this critique, by denouncing democracy as 'fake', constantly runs the risk of destroying it.

Part I

Being Immersed in the News

1

The Presence and Periodization of the Inaccessible

The consistency of the Now

In this first part, we aim to clarify what we mean by using the term 'news' (*actualité*) to designate 'what is happening'. The term 'news', although in common use, has a relatively vague character that words such as 'media' or 'information' clarify only imperfectly. If the 'media' that circulate 'information' belong, without a doubt, to the semantic space of news, the latter also includes, for example (as Tarde was one of the first to remark[1]), the many conversations between people who, generally appearing in the media, or even giving rise to one form or another of inscription or memorization, engage with one another in discussion of the news. A sociology of the news can thus be distinguished from a sociology of the media.

We will be particularly interested in political news, which is not the same as politics – the subject matter of political science – insofar as politics is the practice of decision-making implemented by leaders engaged in competition, or even conflict, within the framework of institutionally predefined entities (such as states and their subdivisions, or supra-state entities, for example the European Union). Political news is about how the shadow cast by politics is projected into stories. These can be made public by being incorporated, as *news items* (*nouvelles*) in the factual media; or they can circulate between a plurality of people who embed them in the fabric of their lifeworlds by making them the subject matter of conversations or comments; or, finally, they can take their place in History with a capital H, the History studied by historians, precisely so as to mark the way some of these stories have escaped oblivion. They then take the form of narratives composed by scholars – nowadays, generally speaking, academics – whose task is to describe to their contemporaries *what happened* in a more or less distant *period*

in the past. The term *news*, whose meaning is mainly temporal, is thus primarily defined in relation to *History*. It designates what is happening *now*, and it is through this that it concerns, a priori, all those who are currently living somewhere on Earth. But as this *now* keeps moving with the arrow of calendar time, it is bound to be transmuted into *the (recent) past* (*naguère*), at a rhythm which depends on the *mode of periodization* adopted.

Starting from this temporal ambivalence, we will seek to clarify the place of the news in relation to these two configurations. The first configuration involves the lifeworlds of people who, in one way or another, participate in the news insofar as it represents what is happening all around them right now. But, as is often the case, this itself may happen even though those who follow the news have no personal experience of what is happening – a distance that can lead to a critical questioning of the *reality* of this modality of lived experience. The second configuration is incorporated into History insofar as the latter has the task of depicting now what was, in another time, present (*actuel*). This approach can take the liberty of stepping back in time to claim a 'depth' lacking in the news, whose 'superficial' nature often gives rise to criticism, when seen from this point of view.

In modern industrial societies, where information sources are multiple and easily accessible (press, television, smartphones, Internet, etc.), news is omnipresent. So it is less the possibility of having access to it than the attention people pay to news items (i.e. the basic units of news) that distinguishes those who devote quite significant amounts of their time and energy to finding out and trying to understand what is happening, particularly on the political level, from those who pay less attention to it. The latter may deliberately endeavour to turn away from it, or may focus solely on news relating to chosen areas, such as sports or 'news in brief' (*faits divers*). Nevertheless, even for the most reluctant people, the project of keeping totally aloof from the news is in practice not feasible.

In this sense, news, and particularly political news, is one of the main mediations by which people connect to each other, by providing them with reference points that promote coordination and by stimulating processes of both identification and differentiation – by means of conversation but also by actions that engage them physically, when they come together or quarrel with one another. The news thus intervenes in social life rather like – as one could say, paraphrasing Hegel[2] – religions that are unaffected by an uneven amount of devotion, and can even benefit from indifference or even rejection. News is today one of the main components of the *inter-est* discussed by Hannah Arendt,