**Silencing the Silent Majority**

**Author: Jean Keyser**

Introduction:

*This piece seeks to theoretically explore the concept of ‘the silent majority’ in relation to our contemporary context and the promulgation of the phenomenon of self-censoring which seem to have permeated its way through to all corners of present-day public civil and political life.*

A recent thought experiment had me asking:

*Is there a correlation between the pressures of social conformity on the individual level and the extent of silence from the ‘silent majority’*? Historically there are many examples where in fact the above came out clearly and loudly on certain matters, for example the mobilisation of the Civil Rights movement. Contrariwise, there has also been times where the silence of the majority cost many their civil liberties, of which the rise of ‘realpolitik’[[1]](#footnote-1) in the 19th century was a great illustration of.

The term ‘silent majority’ traces back to the Roman author Petronius who used it as a euphemism to describe ‘those whom have gone or died before us’, but gained traction and came to denote the “*large and normally undemonstrative cross-section of* [society] *that* […] *refrained from articulating its opinions*” during Richard Nixon’s campaign in the 1960’s (Davenport, 2002 qtd in Rodgers, 2018). He used it then to galvanise voters whom may have not come out to vote due to their dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War. However, the term ‘silent majority’ has become far more problematic as other politicians have subverted it for their own political ends, most noted recently being Donald Trump to refer to the apparent conservative portion of American voters. (Available from: <https://politicaldictionary.com>).

That said, philosophically what we can know for certain on the topic are the following:

* The power of the silent majority has always been a sought after ‘political cache’ of political will, desired by many a political party and/or politician.
* When rallied, there is the potential for seismic shifts in our social fabric which usually changes the course of human socio-political history. Conversely, we can also say that the apathy of the majority has led to some of history’s worst atrocities[[2]](#footnote-2); lastly (and more precisely to this thought experiment);
* The silent majority is not silent at all, but rather it indicates a liminal[[3]](#footnote-3) space between public and private conversation of individuals and groups regarding matters which determine the social zeitgeist.

It is with regards to the last mention point which got me to consider: Is it possible to conduct a narrative historical investigation to find out which social variable(s) coalesce to designate times at which this majority refused to speak?

This questions is made all the more pertinent in our contemporary context where it seems that it has been some time since the ‘silent majority’ mobilised on the scale and in as authentic an expression of as we had seen in previous decades[[4]](#footnote-4). It is almost as if there is a repeat of realpolitik, yet overtly there does not seem to be external cohesive coercive forces driving censorship as was the case in the 19th century when physical force placated the masses. What then is happening?

Ironically, implementing a historical narrative perspective we find that contrary to previous centuries, now there seems to be a connection between the level of ‘perceived social connectedness’ and how comfortable the ‘silent majority’ feels about being open[[5]](#footnote-5). Said differently, how connected we perceive to be seems to influence the level of ingenuousness individuals (who make up the silent majority), are about access to those liminal private conversation regarding our personal beliefs and ideologies. There is therefore a disconnect between those private dialogues that form our personal political views and public political action.

In conclusion, communing full circle it is this observation which leads me to ask a very disturbing question:

 *Could it be that in a world where there is little to no more space for our private life, where every political view or pressure group (no matter how big or small the minority), has access to my inner life, it is we ourselves who are increasingly silencing the silent majority*[[6]](#footnote-6)?

Furthermore, from a socio psychological perspective (just like one would imagine suppressing unwanted thoughts could come out in destructive and disruptive behaviors), what possible dangers does this hold for future generations if this is actually the case? How do we reintegrate individuals in the majority who have been artificially segregated to once again speak out openly as one without falling into patterns of bigotry and ‘*othering*’ which historically have posed even greater threats?

**Bibliography**:

1. Alonso, B. (2021). *Personalization versus individualisation marketing.* Available online from: <https://kibocommerce.com/blog/personalization-versus-individualization-marketing/#:~:text=What%20Is%20Individualization%20in%20Marketing,customer%20experiences%20for%20each%20person> (Accessed 15 June 2022)
2. Anon. (n.d). Cocooning. Available online from: <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/cocooning> (Accessed 15 June 2022)
3. Anon. (2016). *The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing,” a Quote Falsely Attributed to Edmund Burke.* Available online from: <https://www.openculture.com/2016/03/edmund-burkeon-in-action.html> (Accessed 15 June 2022)
4. Anon. (n.d.). *Silent Majority*. Available online from: <https://politicaldictionary.com/words/silent-majority/> (Accessed 8 June 2022)
5. Davenport, R. (2002). *Alpha Teach Yourself American History in 24 Hours*.
Pearson Professional Education. London
6. Emery, H.C. (1915). What is realpolitik? *International Journal of Ethics*. 25(4): 448-468
7. Gadoin, I and Ramel, A. (2013). Liminality – Introduction. *The Hardy Review*. 15(1): 5-10
8. Legg, M. (2021). *The Rise of Self-Censorship: If you're feeling increasingly anxious saying what you think, you’re not alone*. Available online from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/are-we-done-fighting/202107/the-rise-self-censorship> (Accesed 15 June 2022)
9. Niehause, E. (2021). *Self-censorship or just being nice: Understanding college students’ decision about classroom speech*. National Centre for Free Speech and Civic Engagement. University of California press. California
10. Rodgers, R.T. (2018). *Understanding the silent majority*. ProQuest LLC. Michigan
1. Realpolitik is a term first coined by the German liberal A. L. von Rochau who used it to describe how the social realities of his country at the times had meant there was a limit to how much politics should heed ethical concerns, and that the social ills which plagued Germany could only be resolved by some “*dominant force which absorbs all others*” (Emery, 1915: 448-468). During the 19th century such ideology drove the rise of political parties such as Fascism in Italy and the Nazi’s in Germany. Though the term ‘silent majority’ as we now used it had not yet been formalised, in both instances it was reported that most people during that period did no support these political parties (though coerced into them). However, due to the very silence of the majority or unwillingness to act decisively in these countries, it gave such political parties the space to flourish and perpetrate some of the worst atrocities in human history. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A fact first noted my John Stuart Mill who said: “*Let not any one pacify his conscience by the delusion that he can do no harm if he takes no part, and forms no opinion. Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing*” (Available from: <https://www.openculture.com>) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Liminal or liminality comes from the Latin “*limen, inis* […], *which first denoted threshold* […]” though in our modern more figurative use it means “*the barrier between two separate fields or spheres*” of experience or study, “[t]*he margin of the unexpressed*” (Gadoin and Ramel, 2013: 5) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here for example, we can again look back at Nixon presidency and the fact that his use of the term did in fact significantly increase voter participation, though he did not end the war. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This can be attributed to the promulgation of cocooning and individuation most often used in marketing. Cocooning here refers to “*retreating to the seclusion of your home*” (Avaialble from: [www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)) or more precisely your mobile devices whilst individuation is “*a technique used in personalisation strategy to automatically optimize customer experiences for each person*” (Available from: [www.kibocommerce.com](http://www.kibocommerce.com)). It is how our search engines such as Google work to provide us with a more ‘personalised’ service, whilst on social media platforms it leads to self-affirming echo-chambers. The separation that the individual then feels therefore is an artificial one, where they and their personal data is treated as mere means for capital ends. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A study conducted by Prof Niehause looked into the advent of self-censorship at universities (the very institutions where free speech should be most fostered), and found that students did indeed moderated their speech in an attempt to practice social-intelligence, but speech suppression was based more on rumors than personal experience (Niehause, 2021. Available from: <https://freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.ed>). Other studies have made more drastic assertions and found that self-censorship in general is on the rise and causing higher levels of social anxiety (Legg, 2021. Available from: [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)). In either case it is then the individual who pressuring themselves to adjust their way of conversing rather than some external force. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)