

Introduction

Media and Utopia

Arvind Rajagopal

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This special section grows out of a conference that sought to explore the broad theme of global futures and the visions of justice and modes of collectivity that underwrite them. The conference was conceived in the wake of powerful popular movements that emerged suddenly—the Arab Spring, Occupy, campaigns in India denouncing corruption and the resulting violence against women—and in each of these campaigns, what was consistently remarked upon was the technologically mediated character of the events, the importance of social media, and a welcoming of the idealistic character of the spirit animating them. *Media* and *utopia* were relatively uncontroversial descriptive terms that suggested the need for analysis and propelled an interest in critical purchase on these events. The spread of electronic media was finally bringing enlightenment to the rest of the world, or so it seemed from much of the news coverage in the West, and, and since this was an up-to-date enlightenment, it registered with the masses before their governments noticed it.

Hence, while the media were both ubiquitous and constantly invoked in these movements, a strange naivete attended the issue of mediation, noticed only to be applauded. Was popular mobilization not to be welcomed, after all? High levels of euphoria and optimism showed in these contexts, against the odds we might say, and represented unanticipated forms of political collectivity that nevertheless could only harbor good news and did not warrant critique. Was this modernization revisited, or something else? Was it possible that both old and new forms of social and political power were emboldened in the uncritical enthusiasm about the spectacle of popular unity? Was there not an importation of radical and insurgent political aesthetic forms, with crowds defying governments and demanding their rights, in deeply governmentalized contexts, but without sufficient acknowledgment of the challenges posed by them?

Today, the utopian projects of the past are widely questioned; meanwhile social and political debates are crisis driven rather than shaped by longer-term visions. But utopias continue to emerge—witness the many expressions of hope and struggle, individual and collective, often lacking what movements are reckoned by: leaders, blueprints, manifestos, and cadre. Their performative and material practices of communication, and modes of mediation more broadly, are increasingly prominent, and increasingly difficult to separate from the aspirations expressed. As grand utopian narratives fragment, can attention to their forms of mediation clarify the different kinds of futures being imagined today? Given the idealism inherent in most utopian endeavors, can questions about media and mediation help improve understandings of earlier visions of the future and so cast light on the way utopias may be redrawn for present purposes? Media may not determine our situation, contra Friedrich Kittler, but they may help illuminate it.

Utopia?

The conclusion of the Cold War era led to triumphal predictions about the end of history. In fact, the moment marked an end to mass utopias, that is, to the widespread belief in collective emancipation fostered by technologies of the modern state. To reflect on utopia as both artifact and genre is one way to understand how it has changed, and for what reasons.

Utopian thought shaped horizons of expectation, even as it enabled new modes of collectivity. We might think here of writings by Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century, utopian socialism of the nineteenth century, anarchism, anti-colonialism, anticasteism, communism, Negritude, and radical Islam, as well as the reorganization of social life in the Gandhian ashram, the commune, and the kibbutz. Indeed as modern conceptions of time became open-ended, secular, and homogeneous, new folds arose within it, harboring the sense of further possibilities discrepant with the present and superior to it. Modernity generated critique, but it spurred the growth of utopias too; if critique sought to overturn power, utopias imagined themselves as beyond power's reach.

Utopias may be naive, but they continue to emerge, and, given scholarly preoccupation with the high politics of the state, have not gained much scrutiny. One explanation could be that as practices and technologies of abstraction and mediation proliferated with nation building, they also generated their opposite: the sense of an unmediated relation to the benefits of modernity and of alternative forms of belonging. If these practices together helped conceive inclusive utopias across social differences, they also entailed modes of containment, foreclosing questions that did not fit into a given evolutionary framework predicated on ideas of a secularized world available to historical explanation. At the "end of history," then, utopian forms of action may be demands for change that are themselves at risk, capable of being absorbed into globalizing technopolitical systems where alternatives become serial, unconnected events or aestheticized expressions of difference without much significance.

Media?

Media in the last half century or so have come into view as new objects demanding analysis while confounding received disciplinary divisions; the work of Arjun Appadurai has been crucial in this respect. At the same time, the visibility of media as a concept has grown exponentially.

Reinhart Koselleck has observed that concepts emerge within and in response to specific polemics arising in history. We may still be too close to the polemics involved with media to clarify them adequately. But few can have failed to notice the term's shifting and indeterminate lexical character. Is it singular (as in "the media says"), plural ("the media have shown"), or a collective mass noun ("media determine our situation")? Does it designate only the communication industries? Are media actors or merely objects? The term exists in each of these senses, often within the same work. Historical semantics tell us to pay attention when a word acquires new kinds of usage. Historical changes may manifest as disregard for etymology and even grammar and only later acquire intellectual elaboration. But at a time when received eschatology is overshadowed by human-made disasters, and when technique and instrumentality often replace older concerns of good and evil, the prominence of the word *media* is not surprising. And in an age that is skeptical not so much of religion as of secularism itself, *media* and *utopia*, I suggest, also can be companion terms for critical theory.

Media Events, or the Event of the Media

The Cold War sparked an enormous interest in communications media as representing modern technology, across both Eastern and Western blocs. They were understood as tools of a regime or as aiding capitalist markets, but in either case as subservient to political programs. Today, media continue to be assimilated to one or other side of moribund cold war polemics, whether market versus state or freedom versus fundamentalism. But if modernity's advocates regarded media as allies, it is as agents and sites of critical events that media are more prominent now. We can in turn use the "event" as a means of illuminating historical time and to investigate the folds within it, whether the fall of the Bastille, the use of animal fat in car-

tridge grease, as with the Indian Mutiny, or the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, popularly referenced as the start of the Arab Spring.

Media's potential as a tool of political visibility is thus related to the ability of technological mediation to create a layer of virtuality where one or other events recur and provide social actors the sense of an unmediated relationship to the motives that inspire them. We can therefore have rebellions that no experts foresee, uprisings without leaders, and political protests without manifestos. Today, new entities such as the multitude, the precariat, debt, and the environment have emerged as political actors in their own right.

Yet utopian aspirations coexist with intensifying and ever more far-reaching networks of control over everyday life. *Medium* was a term that connoted the realm of spirits; media today loom large over the terrestrial world. While being commonplace, the term is also incessantly invoked; all manner of powers are attributed to it.¹ Media determine political agendas and cultural fashions; they shape the outcome of many endeavors, consigning some initiatives to failure and others to success. As such current usage indeed harks back to the word's older referent, of invisible powers invoked to make sense of the world, potent agents whose distinction lies in their refusal of sociality, alongside their unrelenting intrusiveness in human affairs.

The essays in this special section offer a range of historical observations about the media as subject and as object, but a few preliminary remarks on its historical antecedents can be offered. "Transportation and communication," the older taxonomy, designated the means of moving things and people. The terminology was governmental, and it presumed society as its object of attention. Presumably the growth of propaganda during wartime led to distinguishing communication as a specific process with a unique content, namely information. Locating the emergence of the term in state reason clarifies the shift in contemporary usage from "communication" to "media"; the move corresponds to the retreat of the state.

Media and *utopia* are somewhat like succes-

sor terms to *state* and *ideology*, but, shorn of their repressive, historically negative connotations, offer themselves instead as neutral categories, unmarked by prevailing regimes of power and domination. As a preliminary, let me say that if the title of this essay were to read "State and Ideology," it would immediately appear to name a settled problem, and hence a dated topic, not fully abreast with developments that rendered the state both suspect and not adequate to the problems it claimed to resolve; and ideology, like statist thinking itself, seemingly too structured and structuring, insufficiently sensitive to the contradictory and uneven ways in which ideas operate and dominant classes dominate.

But *media* and *utopia* might be seen as a revised version of state and ideology, or as a placeholder for such terms, in a context where sovereignty has become obscure or even inoperative. The media, as ever-present technologies conveying senses of and responses to the world, both authoritatively and otherwise, offer both intimacy with subjective desires and a refusal to be obedient to them. They are capable of being law-like in their persuasive force and formidable in their mobilizing potential. They decree commandments and rules, accruing and retaining immense audiences without any overt coercion, certifying what is worth knowing about the world and omitting what no one needs to know. In such invocations of the media, there is a veritable fantasy of governmental power, encompassing and surpassing opposition and implicitly relegating critique to the level of private opinion.

Modern sovereignty was conceived in absolutist terms, it is worth recalling, as an answer to interreligious civil war that seemed to have no solution other than to combine the powers of church and crown. Religious difference was redefined as private and as a matter of opinion rather than a collectively held belief (the Latin *opinari* includes both "think" and "believe" among its meanings). The amendment to the Hobbesian social contract was to constitute private property as a restraint on state absolutism (as argued, for instance, by John

1. For an excellent set of essays on how the spirit domain and questions of religiosity more broadly are implicated in technology, see Stolor, *Deus in Machina*.

Locke in his *Second Treatise on Government*), but the ability of the state to certify knowledge and ratify reason remained as the mark of its sovereign status. This is most clearly visible in a limit condition such as a state of emergency; the authority to decide what constitutes an emergency cannot be subject to review.² The expansion and proliferation of means of communication, and the resulting multiplication of the sites of publicity, presents an obvious problem. The knowledge protocols of these media, based as they are on increasingly mobile and fast technologies, challenge the erstwhile knowledge protocols of the state, with the latter's procedures and tempo of fact-finding and deliberative reasoning.

Today we might argue that it is media fetishism that is more noticeable, coexisting with state fetishism but an important complement to it. Media are systems that have often been treated as vanishing mediators instrumental for the purposes they were designed for, and yet they are growing at a rate and on a scale such that they can no longer be ignored. In attempts to understand their work, what we often find is an intensification of naming, that is, the name of *media* being invoked over and over again, only deepening thereby the obscurity of their effects and conferring on what are often the most advanced products of science and technology the most magical and fetishistic aspect.

And utopia—another word whose proliferation over the last several decades, and perhaps increasingly more recently, is something that could not have been foreseen. In the eighteenth century, for Enlightenment philosophes, battling against absolutist despotism, the future that they were fighting for was a real future, one that united all of humankind and that would be achieved, although the philosophes were not necessarily sure how and when. And as the belief in universal progress seized governments in Europe and elsewhere, and an intensely this-worldly fervor shaped the energies of men and women of affairs, *utopia* was a derided term. Thomas Babington Macaulay, for example, is said to have remarked that he would rather have an acre in Middlesex than a principal-

ity in Utopia. Nearly a century later, Lenin distinguished between socialism utopian and scientific, the former being dreamy and impractical, the latter hardheaded and liable to achieve its aims. But as Koselleck has argued, such a view pays scant attention to the changing historical connotations of time as a concept.³

In traditional conceptions of time, it is the past that is idealized; the onward movement of time entails a series of defilements and disasters, culminating in the foreordained destruction of the world. Modern conceptions of time have claimed, by contrast, an openness toward the future, treating it not as provisioned but as underdetermined. Whereas the principal sense of lived time was cyclical, based on ritual and the change of seasons, modern time is understood as linear in its movement. There is an increasing evacuation of local knowledge and embedded experience from the understanding of time and a growing quotient of expectation about the future; in short, there is a diminishing ratio of experience vis-à-vis expectation in modern depictions of time.⁴ As the routines of everyday life come to be increasingly mediated through images and narratives derived from afar, future orientation becomes susceptible to mythic forms of imagination that are, however, seldom perceived as such.

The twentieth century witnessed utopian myths of collective emancipation and mass prosperity shared across Eastern and Western blocs. Today those older collective utopias have far less weight, and calls for revolutionary change tend to ring hollow. Instead we have a reliance on liberal proceduralism and a demurral or refusal with respect to projects of mass uplift. But in the absence of given collective utopias promoted by the world's superpowers, we witness a proliferation of utopias, both of escape and of reconstruction, to use Lewis Mumford's distinction.⁵ The issue is to sensitize ourselves to their existence and to formulate adequate means of analyzing and responding to them.

There are many remarkable things about the century of mass utopias to ponder as we rush headlong into a time when such a general optimism

2. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 1.

4. See *ibid.*

3. See Koselleck, *Futures Past*.

5. See Mumford, *The Story of Utopias*.

about universal progress is hard to resurrect, or even to imagine as having been widely entertained as a possibility. But its combination of intense idealism and intense practicality is perhaps its most remarkable feature, to the point where philosophical thinking—inquiry into the conditions and implications of thinking in one way rather than another—was rigidly policed or regarded as frivolous. What is most striking for us today is that the idea of a mass utopia has only been embraced in the twentieth century. In earlier periods, there seems to be a lack of awareness of utopia as a category.

And this is because utopia was, for all of its political entailments, internally an apolitical space. Was this not the highlight of the Cold War era? Capitalism and communism, worldviews that were products of the enlightenment, could not imagine political coexistence beyond an armed truce and had to conclude with the victory of one over the other. Not only did these twentieth-century utopias combine intense idealism and intense practicality, they conceived and enacted social organization on an unprecedented level of inclusiveness while reducing political participation to highly structured enactments, whether as electoral behavior or as the actions of party cadre. The obverse of mass social uplift was an extensive depoliticization, where the ruling party or the capitalist state largely monopolized the terms of public discourse and reduced political action to the observance of given rules. The challenge at this time, I suggest, is to conceive or remediate utopias in ways that can address the political impasse of our time.

The Essays

Ariella Azoulay, who has emerged as a prominent and influential thinker putting media and the political in dialogue with each other, argues that every utopian model of rights provides latent or patent forms of license for discrimination against those who are denied such rights, and as such has a dystopia joined at its root, as it were. Those granted citizenship willy-nilly become complicit in the perpetration of injustice against those denied such rights. Such limitations are built into the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) as well as of the post-WWII Universal Decla-

ration of Human Rights (1948), Azoulay contends. Against the syntax of what she calls such differential forms of sovereignty, Azoulay points to a civil syntax of human rights, one that can be deduced through the particular material manifestations of opposition to given claims of state-sponsored rights. Just as utopia is bisected by its opposite, material forms of mediation are equally bisected by rival claims of human rights. The abstraction from the historical flux of events performed by sovereignty may be compounded by the abstraction from lived understanding enabled by technologies such as photography. Against such abstractions in the service of dominant forms of power, Azoulay insists on sites of political alignment that have hitherto gone unnoticed at the level of civil society as opposed to that of the state, mobilized among other things through media technologies: “Photography’s form of political relations are not organized around a sovereign power.”⁶

Arguing that Azoulay’s model of the civil contract of photography offers a “linear, utopian arrow,” Christopher Pinney seeks to complicate her argument. Azoulay’s argument illuminates battles over photography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he acknowledges, and demonstrates a vector of popular struggle that cannot be contained within the logic of the state. Smaller, faster technologies undermine the “tripod regime” and the political structures it supported, but recent developments increase state power once again. Whereas state power subjects citizens to surveillance, those aspiring for citizenship rights subjectivate themselves through available technologies and demand to be seen and to be granted the rights accompanying such visibility. Pinney’s argument goes further, however, to point to the anxieties aroused through the rapid spread of cellphone videography and the resulting proliferation of centers of publicity. Prophetic and utopian conceptions of visual technology persist, Pinney argues, but alongside them are a myriad of new disciplinary uses the camera is put to.

Asif Siddiqi’s article uncovers one of the ironies of Cold War developmentalism in the way India’s television system came to be established. For the United States at this time, asserting their vision

6. Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 110.

of development was a matter not only of setting an example and analyzing the comparative virtues of Eastern and Western systems, but also of wielding brute force against inconvenient regimes. Siddiqi provides hitherto little-known information about the Indian physicist and technocrat Vikram Sarabhai, who was instrumental in building the national space program. While Sarabhai was arguing for a “total conception” of national development within which satellite communication had to belong, he was negotiating with a larger totality, namely US military power, in order to further his aims. In his plans for India’s satellite development, Sarabhai relied on MIT’s Lincoln Labs, which during this time, the 1960s, Noam Chomsky and others were protesting for their extensive involvement in secret weapons research. Siddiqi thus points to the intersection between the apparently peaceful aims of India’s satellite communications program and US interest in securing its own worldwide influence and in limiting either an expanding Soviet camp or new loci of power, specifically nuclear power.

Liberal theories of politics presume a universalist utopia open to all identities, but, Francis Cody points out, they rely on a further presumption. Minorities retain an embodied character and do not transcend their specific status, unlike those who are dominant. The latter can abstract themselves from their particularity and exemplify universalism, whereas minorities persistently fail to do so. The fault, however, is in the theory and not in minorities themselves. Liberal universalism lacks all specification; political majorities can therefore ex-nominate themselves and populate their utopia to full capacity, while easily quelling any dissent they might arouse. Perhaps that was the plan all along. But its insufficiency becomes obvious when politics is treated less as a dispensation or an order and more as a right, asserted by people who all turn out to be minorities of one kind or another.

Cody foregrounds this long-standing problem of political theory and argues that at its root is an insensitivity to the reflexive interaction between political actors and the goals they pursue, multiply mediated through print, oratory, public spaces, and political events such as of populist mobilization and collective violence. Received theories tend to freeze particular assumptions about modes of mediation and the styles of representation appro-

priate to them. With few exceptions, these theories share a distrust of the crowd as a political actor, while valorizing print as enabling rational communication. Drawing on detailed examples from the insurgent politics of caste-based democracy in Tamil Nadu, Cody argues that theories of mediation may already be embedded in the formation of crowds, which then respond to and transform the political visions of their representatives. It is by exploring such open-ended populist dynamics that we can arrive at nonreductive understandings of contemporary politics and the varying futures they strive for. ■■■■

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