Media versus Masses? Contemporary Populism and the Crisis of Late Liberalism: Notes from the U.S. and India

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Rather than taking us forward into a new future, contemporary populism suggests the media undertake a churning, by bringing buried layers of the past closer to the surface. Historical memories of past defeat as well as glory can become issues of the moment, whether to 'make America great again' or Hindus in India 'proud' again.

The U.S. and in India offer two specific examples of rightwing populism flourishing across a range of media channels, that espouse such positions. I discuss these cases against a brief outline of modern political revolutions to show the importance of this history for understanding how we formulate arguments about media, and relatedly, how we understand contemporary populism.

The history of modern politics has a connecting thread running through it, a series of theories or assumptions about media, that are not necessarily spelt out. That history, which would be part of a political history of media, and media theory, is attempted here in a very preliminary way.

In what follows, I argue that the history of media and the history of modern politics are crucial to understanding contemporary populism. Here I understand 'media' as standing for the category of technology as such. My argument confronts two influential tendencies, one separating technological from political history, and the other treating 'media' as a banal and uninterrogated term. Both these tendencies are themselves intelligible in a larger perspective, as I hope to show.

Introduction: The "Communication Revolution" as Prelude to Rightwing Populism

The centrality of television, the internet and social media to the power of contemporary populism can be seen both in the Global North and the Global South. This might be the worldwide convergence anticipated by modernization theorists (*ubi infra*), except that it's neither modern nor a convergence exactly, except in one sense. If we were told that the spread of media augured a "communication revolution," what is on display now looks more like counter-revolution. Anti-immigrant and anti-minority attitudes, and policies hostile to working classes, were already fashionable for a while; the corona pandemic has only enhanced the impact of these attitudes.

"Show me a plague and I'll show you the world," the late AIDS activist Larry Kramer wrote (2015: 27-28). My article focuses on media apparatuses of showing, whose growth in the post-Cold War period correlates with the rise of right-wing populism worldwide, and whose spread has seemed as irresistible as a viral infection. But if the plague shines a spotlight on ignored aspects of the world, the media bring a history in their wake, as technologies of freedom undermining Communist dictatorship in favor of capitalist democracy (Ithiel de Sola Pool 1990). Where neither a Communist dictatorship nor a capitalist democracy obtained, as was the case in much of the world, the effects of communication technologies were unknown. But U.S. experts were certain the results would be positive (Daniel Lerner and Wilbur Schramm 1967). Remarkably, there has been little new research on this important issue after the early Cold War period, and since then media growth has only gained momentum.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the U.S. reinvigorated its championing of the freedom of information flow in its foreign policy, arguing that such an approach had helped win the Cold War. From Silicon Valley emerged a libertarian slogan, "information wants to be free," infusing the idiom of human rights into a revised argument for free trade. Meanwhile new media companies advanced their profits and market share at a pace never before witnessed in modern history. In this heady context of economic growth and political triumph, the association between communication technologies and freedom

grew even stronger, although this association had arisen to fight an enemy that no longer existed.

Anti-Communism, for all of its problems, had spurred the U.S. to improve its international image, and thus try to live up to its claimed superiority to Communism. For example, the passage of the Civil Rights Act was in part due to Cold War rivalry (Mary L. Dudziak 2000). This rivalry produced a geopolitical balance that was a foundation for decolonization and postcolonial nation-building, as superpowers competed with each other for global influence. That foundation, already eroding by 1991, disappeared with the Soviet Union's collapse, giving market forces free play on a global scale after an interregnum of 70 years (Saskia Sassen 2010). Business elites thereafter advanced their interests and increased their influence over states to an extent greater than before, leading to deeper inequality in many parts of the world. Aggressive and exclusionary forms of nationalism have accompanied this growth in inequality.

Cold War social science made the propagation of media into a global mission, through a little-remarked distinction between the west and the rest (Rajagopal, 2020). Freedom, it turned out, meant different things across the world. For the U.S., it meant retaining and reproducing a system already in place, about whose modernity and democracy no discussion was required. For non-western countries, it meant putting new systems in place, with communications media promoted as accelerating economic growth (Schramm, 1964).

Thus experts hailed media technologies as revolutionary for the Third World, while helping to conserve the liberal order in the west (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). As the class of instruments with the widest and most intimate reach, it is rewarding to consider "media" as representing the category of technology as such. Excavating its place in an historical account of postwar media growth can clarify recent political history, as I explain below.

A Rule of Postcolonial Difference

In the United States' battle to defuse the Soviet threat, media played a crucial role. That role was not limited to the task of propaganda, whether "black" or "white;" this racially coded

distinction was standard State Department parlance during the Cold War, incidentally. Not interest but ideals, not conflict but conviviality, were the keys to understanding history, in the view of U.S. experts advising the government during the Cold War (Rajagopal 2020). Thus, contrary to long-standing arguments of Marxist philosophy, the economist Max Millikan argued that changes in communication had the most fundamental and lasting effect, and not those of economic production (Max F. Millikan 1967). Economic redistribution was a site of class struggle, but making media messages more abundant might actually thwart the possibility of such struggle, if the appropriate choices were made. Millikan, for many years Director of the influential Center for International Studies at MIT, where figures like W.W. Rostow and Daniel Lerner also worked, was also Assistant Director of the Office of Research and Reports at the CIA for a year. In his account of how communication could contain potential conflict, he argues:

> The distorted want-get ratio, which is at the root of current developmental difficulties, is the product of a spurious and erroneous communication strategy, which has led people to believe things that were not true and expect things that could not happen. (Max F. Millikan 1967)

The media were at fault if people desired things beyond their reach, but correctives could be applied via the media too. When the impasse of Cold War ideological rivalry centered on haves and have-nots, few options seemed better as a response than using communication technology, since more could share it at negligible additional cost.

The end of the Cold War saw a remarkable resurgence of the idea of the free flow of information, which John Foster Dulles declared in 1946, could serve as a single-point foreign policy agenda, if he were allowed one point alone (John S. Knight 1946; Schiller 1975). When the problem this policy (of the free flow of information) responded to no longer existed, and a capitalist market logic ruled most or all of the world, anticommunism's disappearance as a political restraint proved to be dysfunctional. Information is not only a utility; to the extent that it is exchanged or traded, it behaves like currency. Information then may follow Gresham's Law.[1] If bad money drives out good money, bad information can drive out good information. Five decades later after it was first announced, the free flow of information came to appear as if it was an inherent

feature of the digital media. Thus the remark attributed to internet pioneer John Gilmore, "the internet interprets censorship as damage and routes around it" (Philip Elmer-Dewitt 1993). Cold War triumphalism thus seemed to wipe out the memory of "free flow of information" as an ideological measure. When discussing the role of communications abroad, American scholars could project a political role for media by explicitly describing it as an ally of progress, as this 1964 passage from Schramm suggests:

> In part the world conscience has been stimulated by a revulsion against colonialism. Improved communications have helped bring this about, just as they have helped to inform the have-not peoples how the others live. Everywhere there has been a remarkable flood of mass media coverage of the new countries. (Schramm, 1964: 15)

Certainly the categories of media and communication, although far from central in anticolonial struggles, came to be championed by the United States, in programs to assist new nation states in their developmental agenda. The insistence on embedding virtue within mass media use underlined the sales pitch. No technologies appeared to offer a greater shortcut to modernity than mass media. Poor nations were reassured that no investment in the modernization package could go awry, and that each component would bring all the other benefits of modernization along. (Lerner and Schramm, 1967:59) Modernity became an easily grafted, self-replicating organism thanks to the development of communication technologies, which the U.S. were prepared to share with the world, and which were advertised as the best value for money. The novelty of this effort however was concealed and rationalized in terms of the human capacity invoked by the word communication:

> Human communication is a —perhaps *the* fundamental social process. It is the glue that holds society together. It is the homeostatic fluid that flows among the dynamic organs of society, keeping them in balance. (Schramm, 1956:2)

Communication may have been the glue of society, but it was also its dynamo, rewarding outlays with speedy growth, according to this view (Lerner & Schramm, 1967:3-4). Modernization theory and Communication studies have each

been critiqued, but in both cases, winning the argument in theory was the triumph; assumptions remained largely unchanged in the wider world.[2]

Interestingly, although the communication revolution was a global project, even critical scholars were slow to take an interest in media effects elsewhere except to elaborate an already-formed critique. When scholars published monographs on the subject, such issues were relegated to area studies, a Cold War-era discipline that bracketed questions of geopolitics and dwelt in depth on questions of language, culture and region.[3] Modernization as a project straddling the world's regions became a background to area scholarship, rather than a focus in itself. It is a mark of the relative stability of Cold War geopolitics that the latter's influence on scholarship has been so slow to change. Postwar social scientists in fact foresaw a more internationalist social science than what later obtained, as this quote from the sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Charles Glock indicates:

> While it is inappropriate to talk about an American empire, it is entirely in place to discuss the large and growing sphere of American influence. In this regard, a comparison with the British Empire suggests itself. The British Empire was based on an elaborate colonial administration where the civil servants came face to face with the local population... in the American sphere of influence there is little face to face contact with the local population. Whatever influence is exercised has to be established largely by remote control — propaganda and information services. It can be predicted, therefore, that international communications research will be a natural concomitant of the current American situation in world politics. (Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Charles Y. Glock n.d.)

The reasons why international communications research did not grow even as the United States remained a superpower during the Cold War, as Lazarsfeld and Glock predicted, are to some extent anticipated in their account. When U.S. influence waned, or as it became less overtly political, interest in international communications research also waned. Especially as postcolonial nationalism became more assertive and complex, the survey research methods of the international communications approach could not generate very useful comparative results.

At the height of U.S. influence, research showed that "free flow of information" in practice meant one-way flow of information from the United States (Nordenstreng and Varis, 1974). This was also the time of demands in the United Nations for a more just information order (Wimmer and Schiller 2002), of majority votes against positions taken by the United States, such as on the right of the United States to beam satellite signals directly into people's homes (Queeney 1978). All of this meant that the ground of adjudication provided by implicit or explicit American leadership was no longer available. International or comparative communications research was conceived not out of interest in the rest of the world for its own sake. Rather it was to monitor political opinion abroad and assess the effect of media technologies while doing so. Thus, with the perception of diminished American influence abroad, it is not surprising if international communications research undertaken by U.S. researchers diminished. A recent study confirms the tendency for postwar social sciences to confine their inquiries to domestic or national rather than transnational issues, for the most part (Kurzman 2017).

The disappearance of interest in comparative media research went side-by-side with the development of area studies that examined linguistic, social and cultural formations of non-western regions, and took a nation-centered research paradigm for granted (Wimmer and Schiller 2002). As a result, attempts to make international connections in thinking about media effects have tended to be polemical, arguing for or against American imperialism abroad for example. My attempt in this article is therefore to foreground the need for a comparative perspective on the work of media. I do so by trying to clarify the relationship between communication technology and political change, through a brief account of modern political history, leading up to contemporary populism.

Populism as Simulacrum

Populism can be difficult to discredit because it often stands for the people as a whole, namely, the proper subject of politics, without specifying what kind of politics it entails. Hence it can manifest in the most diverse political formations from fascism to socialism and beyond. Relevant here is the late Ernest Laclau's argument that the category of populism flags not its content but its dynamics. He has argued that a populist

movement is defined not by interest or ideology, but by diverse and often unrelated issues combining through an 'empty signifier' to symbolize 'the people' against their enemy (2005).

Although populism was prominent in 19th and early 20th C. U.S. history, scholarly writing on the subject tended to explore its manifestations in less developed countries of the Global South, where it first became ensconced several decades ago as statecraft rather than as grassroots mobilization. For example, Laclau drew from Latin American history to formulate his first insights on the subject (1977). The United States, like most other western countries, was believed to have strong institutions governed by the rule of law, not susceptible to being buffeted by popular politics to the extent witnessed in less developed countries. For this reason, populism's recent eruption in the U.S. is like the breaching of a barrier, both intellectual and historical. Especially after WWII, the United States has appeared as a very model of consensual democracy, unlike much of the rest of the world.The unthinkable has happened: a form of politics hitherto treated as peripheral in scholarly analysis is now installed at the center.

Contrary to the past, when the curious slipperiness and unstable character of populism used to constitute its negative attributes, applied not to the practice of one's own preferred politics but to those of others, today those very attributes turn populism into a simulacrum, i.e., something whose reality is judged by its representation rather than the other way around. This befits the politics of an age where media representations fairly saturate the world and circulate at the speed of light, leaving reality as we knew it far behind. Expert commentary has not caught up with this shift. Political scientists list characteristics for identifying true populism, and propose solutions to contain it, for example, while international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch warn of 'the dangerous rise of populism' around the world (HRW, 2017:1).[4] But 'populism' is an analytic seeking to grasp an emergent set of forms. Its strategies are improvised rather than doctrinal; the object populism names is shifting, not stable. For example, it moves back and forth between the left and the right. What is required is both an historical and a political analysis of populist forms, moving from revolutions of the past to contemporary counterrevolution.

In what follows, I argue that the history of media and the history of modern politics are crucial to understanding contemporary populism. Here I understand 'media' as standing for the category of technology as such. My argument confronts two influential tendencies, one separating technological from political history, and the other treating 'media' as a banal and uninterrogated term. Both these tendencies are themselves intelligible in a larger perspective, as I hope to show.

Three Phases of Mass Mediated Politics

When we have gained some historical distance from the present moment, it is likely that the former White House adviser to Donald Trump, Stephen Bannon, will be seen as transformative not only for his role in right-wing populist strategy, but more importantly for turning populists from distant objects into lively interlocutors within expert discourse. A self-appointed spokesperson for 'the global populist movement,' (Horowitz, 2018)[5], Bannon deftly deployed populism as an identity and kept his interlocutors on the backfoot. His working-class origins allowed him to don the mantle of the oppressed, while his time in the U.S. Navy and in the finance industry made his anti-elite rhetoric credible.

But his pronouncements were contestable. For example, Bannon's implication that a 'global populist movement' existed is misleading to say the least. Contemporary populists are often hostile to immigrants and foreigners. They may copy each other's rhetoric and tactics but their politics are usually xenophobic and anti-global. However, Bannon's self-presentation as an erudite populist nonplussed critics unprepared for a dismissive category coming to life and talking back to them. In populism today, we have a term that emerged from the lexicon of the academy, of historians and political scientists, passing through popular culture, and re-emerging as a political identity, in an itinerary that has escaped notice. Inseparable from this development is the understanding Bannon had of the interaction of media technologies and markets, based on his experience in Hollywood, in the online gaming industry and in online news (Teitelbaum, 2020). 'Media' is thus a key term in the rise of his own brand of populism.

In Marxist scholarship, the relationship between media and state was perhaps most influentially formulated in Louis Althusser's argument about ideological state apparatuses, where media served as political instruments of the ruling classes (Althusser, 1971). Following the explosive spread of communication technologies in the period after World War II, the script has flipped. Increasingly, the state appears like an apparatus of the media. Although this development may seem to result from a quantitative expansion of media, it had at least three preconditions.

First, it represented a qualitative redefinition of media, as agents of liberty rather than merely as instruments of human will, a shift that occurred in the early Cold War period. Second, the relationship between liberty as understood here, and the political context of its enactment, was treated as secondary. A free and self-regulated media system was assumed to be the goal, and where media industry personnel dominated the discussion, demands for regulation could easily provoke accusations of censorship. And last but not least, the novel historical status accorded to the media, as technologies of freedom rather than as apparatuses of the state, was obscured, thanks to a well-funded postwar academic discipline that equated media growth with modernization *tout court*.[6] Corporations and governments welcomed media growth as an absolute good, while the majority got something for nearly nothing, just as elites had historically been accustomed to. Alarm about data extraction and surveillance was expressed early on (Packard 1957), but such issues became politically significant relatively recently.

As long as disagreement could be managed within the prevailing liberal consensus, the emergence of a new power center escaped serious attention. The move away from this Cold War-era consensus occurred with the rise of neoconservatism during the Thatcher and Reagan governments. The new consensus idealized individual self-reliance and disparaged state-led redistribution, except when militarist. It offered relief to the fiscal crisis of the welfare state and prepared the victory lap against socialism, as it turned out. It would also help create a reactionary consensus that undermined the postwar order, without any clear plan for the future.

Liberal democracy's association with capitalism was, it became clear in retrospect, a contingent response to the challenge of

Second World socialism. Against the fond expectations of liberals, the end of the Soviet Union led not to a finer and better capitalism, but to abandoning social restraints on accumulation. Thereafter, arguments for limits to capital had to battle the stigma of socialism's failure, and accusations that the developmental state was history's loser. In fact, western economies were historically nurtured through varying forms of state control.[7] Furthermore, each side of the Iron Curtain relied on the expansion of technological control systems, for which a *laissez faire* stance was absurd and impractical.

The battle between capitalism and communism was overblown, Eric Hobsbawm has suggested (1994).[8] In fact it was misplaced. The challenge should have been to find political solutions to the expansion of technological systems that expanded the scope for democracy, instead of nurturing technocracy. However, freedom became the watchword against fears about possible Communist takeover; demonstrating the success of free markets became a partisan cause. And with the end of the Cold War, the state oversight designed for the success of this cause began to be lifted.

This meant that the consensus underlying state authority weakened in the process. The result was a world known essentially through mass media, and where the veracity of any given account could only be determined through other media narratives (Gitlin, 1980). Apprehension about communist subversion led Truman and Eisenhower to authorize psychological warfare abroad, and punish dissent at home, relying heavily in the media for the purpose (Nordenstreng, Kaarle and Varis, Tapio 1974). The newer media industries of radio and later television cultivated loyalty and amplified the government's foreign policy, while the film industry, which was not only older but featured numerous distinguished *emigrés*, was subject to threats and punishment, the denunciation of the "Hollywood 10" for alleged Communism being an instructive example (Doherty, 2019). The resulting political consensus was held to confirm the democratic character of American society. Alongside, a discipline of Communication studies emerged, that equated communication with society. "...[P]eople were still most successfully persuaded by give-and-take with other people …[;] the influence of the mass media was less automatic and less potent than had been assumed" (Katz 1957: 61). The "human" aspect of communication hence deserved more attention than its

technological, organizational or ideological dimensions. But the term "communication" of course referred to human as well as machinic communication. The successor term, "media," drawn by Marshall McLuhan from the discourse of art criticism, helped to draw a veil over the years of Cold War propaganda (McLuhan 1994). The media were technological and industrial, but a set of obfuscating conventions for thinking about them became established by scholars of Communication, the most successful postwar academic discipline in terms of the number of students enrolled, faculty recruited and jobs it eventuated in (Park and Pooley, 2008).

In the conventions inculcated by the discipline, 'media' fudges rather than clarifies the discrepancy between human and machine. Such usage fosters identification with technology or with the perspectives it affords. The challenge is to locate claims to stand for the people within the history of techno-politics, and to demystify the latter. Arguably, 'media' and 'mass,' long intertwined, are increasingly unstable categories that both require and oppose each other. The poignant reliance of post-Cold War liberalism on institutions of 'the media' to discipline contemporary populism after having enabled its rise, point to the need to disentangle media theory and political history.

Now, the emergence of the people onto the stage of politics can be understood, in contemporary terms, as a mediatic event. The people must be represented in order to exist; their representation thus precedes and ensures their political existence (Gaonkar, 2014). In modern history, it is with the idea of revolution that such an event occurs (Arendt, 1963). In the post WWII period, the United States itself aimed to redefine this idea with its program of a "communication revolution," meant to forestall or pre-empt the possibility of a communist revolution, we might recall. By doing so, it sought to align media history and political history in its own preferred direction. The West did win the Cold War, and that was the aim of this maneuver. What happened thereafter once Soviet Communism dissolved itself, and market ideology acquired an uncontested force in much of the world, was that media growth too was increasingly uncontested, and, moreover, carried the imprimatur of Cold War triumphalism.

We can outline a rough chronology of three phases in this development, marked by the French and Russian revolutions,

followed by the contemporary phase of populism that is still in the making, and in which counterrevolutionary tendencies are prominent.

Revolution, Counterrevolution and 'The People'

Seen in retrospect, the past two centuries have had long periods of stability punctuated by intense phases of conflict up-ending established norms and systems, accompanied at times by mass uprisings. In these uprisings, demands for direct democracy have challenged conventions of political representation, and popular sovereignty has claimed a higher authority than that of constituted powers. If the masses turned into a political subject, Rousseau's *volonté générale* made manifest, the task of the modern state was to redefine the masses as a population; his term reappears in Article Six of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Once divided into classes with varying attributes and needs, and rendered an object of governance, the threat to order posed by the masses could be contained and deflated. In this sense revolution and counterrevolution can be seen as two poles demarcating the field of politics. From time to time however, the masses could and did break free to act outside or against the state, even if they did not overturn the state. This third tendency we can describe as populist, as I will discuss below.

In the nineteenth century, 'revolution' became a term canonized by European history, once the French Revolution and the industrial revolution were combined to normalize revolution as the mode of historical progress (Toynbee, 1980). The term revolution had a value, in the sense of either being oriented to the future or against a governing power. Arguably 'populism' used to have a value, in this sense, since it was usually defined as anti-elite, even if it was anarchic or mis-directed. Contemporary populism has reduced even this defining feature, of anti-elitism, to an empty form within which any content can be placed.

Before the French Revolution, knowledge about politics was closely held, and circulated mainly as counsel directed at princes; well-known examples range from Kautilya to Machiavelli (Gray, 2014). Roughly speaking, the majority was historically the object of politics; what are now called rights initially amounted to privileges granted to the people, that later

became political weapons against the custodians of privilege, most prominently with the French Revolution, which inaugurated mass politics. Battles for power had to win legitimacy, through discourses addressed to the public at large (Furet, 1981). Language became political, and opinion acquired a power it never had before, through varieties of mass action whose sphere of influence grew with the emerging public for print.

If the French Revolution aimed to emancipate all humanity and ended by empowering the bourgeoisie as the agents of democracy, the Russian Revolution returned the idea of people's revolution to the center stage of history. The Bolsheviks rejected the Anglo-French coinage of 'industrial revolution' as a logic of history, bringing the question of politics again to the forefront. And if the Jacobins harkened back to the republican ideal of classical politics with their emphasis on direct democracy, the Bolsheviks burst open the limits of parliamentary proceduralism by bringing popular violence once more within the repertoire of party competition. Making an unwavering distinction between friend and enemy in the achievement of a given end, they expanded not only the field of politics but also its theoretical understanding.[9]

There was therefore a greater reflexivity about instrumentality in political thinking, as a result of the harmonization of state power and scientific knowledge over the course of the nineteenth century, accelerated by imperial governance and warfare, and corresponding to the wider array of instrumentalities available for its practice. Thus, Leon Trotsky observed that the state represented the legitimate monopoly of the means of violence.[10] Knowledge and power could finally acknowledge their reciprocal dependence.

At the same time the Russian Revolution intensified the importance of opinion and rephrased the distinctions between conservative and liberal, reviving then-moribund identities of left and right-wing, which had been current in the French Revolution. This was not merely word play. Nineteenth century conservatives and liberals contained their disagreements through institutionalized politics, such as for example, Whigs and Tories in Britain. The twentieth century terminology of left and right-wing underlined the fact that the left too could resort to violence, albeit through mass action and public mobilization (Sorel 1999). Gradual, legislative and procedural change was

one option; radical rupture was another (Eric Hobsbawm 1996).

And revolution would no longer travel on horseback as it did in the eighteenth century. The spread of communications foreshortened the time of its movement, as Marx and Engels had predicted in the Communist Manifesto. The speed of counterrevolution grew as well, and took different names. Historical accounts tend to treat these events separately, as if the story of Communism pertained to Communists alone, and as if the story of twentieth century democracy and nation-building were not in part responses to the challenges posed by Communism.

Thus, Woodrow Wilson's promise to 'make the world safe for democracy,' carried on telegraph wires in April 1917 across the world, responded to the Russian Revolution two months earlier. Wilson's Fourteen Points and his support for colonial peoples' self-determination stole the spotlight away from Lenin's public revelation that the Great Powers had signed secret treaties, such as the 1916 Sykes-Picot treaty carving up the Ottoman Empire, without notifying the inhabitants of the territories therein (Fedyashin, 2017). Even at the time, they were unequal competitors for the world's attention. Today, after the Soviet Union's dissolution, historians can act as if American leaders operated in splendid solitude, and conceived solutions for the world alone in their lofty eminence.[11]

At the time however, the battle over opinion, however unequal, had become global, and came to be conducted at an accelerated tempo in sound, text and image. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, Soviet filmmakers devised montage, treating reality itself as a plastic medium for politicizing the masses. Montage was a two-edged sword however. Hollywood used it instead to enhance the sense of a seamless fantasy in which viewers could immerse themselves as spectators rather than participants.

Meanwhile as politics became more deeply militarized and simultaneously more public, the candor of an earlier period became inconvenient. Orwellian doublespeak ('war' renamed as 'defense,' and 'propaganda' turning into 'truth,' for example (Orwell, 1949)) was not merely science fiction, nor was it only a screed against totalitarianism. It reflected two sides of an emerging social reality: technocrats wielding power, using

euphemistic terms in the name of democracy. Communication technologies provided the 'media' for this emerging reality. Experts urged the public to accept the media as transparent (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), while they gained hitherto undreamed-of scope for social intervention. Such openness to expertise was arguably prepared over the nineteenth century through expanding spheres of culture and education that helped cultivate a pedagogical relationship between elite and masses.

Nineteenth century European writers had cultivated audiences with a taste for socially progressive, realist literature, as bearers of Enlightenment traditions and of the Victorian-era optimism that humankind set itself only such problems that it could solve. But World War I and the onset of mass politics thereafter made the utopic visions of bourgeois individualism questionable at the very least.[12] Economic crisis overtook the west, and libidinal collectivities expanded and elaborated by technologically mediated sound and image, brought right-wing governments to power across the west. Their anti-Communism allayed liberal suspicions at first and granted them the space to expand. Ironically Soviet Russia's support became indispensable in the eventual defeat of fascism.

While a detailing of this interwar and wartime history is beyond the scope of this article, it is sufficient to note here that in this context, communications technologies posed urgent questions not simply of control and regulation, but of understanding. However, conceiving of media as 'extensions of man' (1964), in Marshall McLuhan's influential phrase, became the norm in the postwar period, implying media were a natural outgrowth and not technologies with a political history.

Communicationism

Each revolution was sought to be normalized in its own way, in order to contain the threat of mass politics and radical change. In the nineteenth century, European ruling classes echoed the lessons of democracy and professed a belief in gradual change, while containing large-scale political violence within the colonies. Educated elites linked through print media helped maintain this equilibrium for a while. The Russian Revolution is closer to us in history, and the responses to it appear more vivid. It presented a greater challenge, no doubt because mass uprising, unexpectedly, could still make a difference. The

challenges of containing it were greater, as suggested by the tumultuous interregnum of the interwar years, with fascism adopting all the paraphernalia and tactics of Communism while rejecting the principle of democracy.

After World War II, as the United States adjusted itself to its new superpower status, its earlier stance of episodic engagement was clearly inadequate to the demands of world leadership. American universities convened conferences on the American Revolution, a subject left to antiquarians until then, to fashion arguments justifying U.S. supremacy to the rest of the world. In one such conference, Hannah Arendt pointed out that the founders of the American republic had chosen to focus their energies on building a durable republic, instead of spreading the gospel of their achievement abroad as France's Jacobins had done.[13]

The task of politics in America was understood mainly as enabling individuals in their pursuits of happiness. What resulted was a novel formation: a mass consumer society premised on political equality and liberty, but abjuring the expression of itself as a political collectivity, whereas the Soviet Union retained the idea of a political collective, represented by the party. Foregoing a more extended comparison between these contexts, we can note that the mass in each context was not an agent so much as an ornament fashioned for aesthetic consumption, on stage and on screen, in Siegfried Kracauer's terms (1995).

The culture industry thus prepared the terms for managing domestically what came to be called the communication revolution.[14] Not economics but communication became the key to historical understanding, and to accelerating national development, or so influential scholars argued (Lerner & Schramm, 1967).[15] The claim of 'communication revolution' addressed the Global South where industries were still scarce, and where the word revolution, used without qualification, was the most powerful word in political argot. Governments in the developing world thus found the idea of a communication revolution appealing. Projecting communication as inherently democratic, without for example distinguishing between technology and human capacity, was not a self-evident proposition. Frequent repetition of the claim and the regular flow of new technologies, from satellites to constantly improving electronic goods, made it seem as if

'communication revolution' was a description rather than a proposition.

This entailed what we can call 'communicationism,' a belief that arose during this time, that communication was both a means and an end in itself (Rajagopal, 2020). Responding to the Communists' influential theory of history and well-honed skill in ideological warfare, 'communicationism' adroitly avoided a battle of ideas, one that might have put the U.S. at a disadvantage. Instead Americans opted for a propaganda of the deed. The latest technologies in communication would be made available to poor countries, as objects everyone could perceive and enjoy, unlike mere ideas that were like a pie in the sky. What was more, these objects would accelerate progress and, it was assumed, alleviate problems of poverty and inequality.

Cold War era political debates were subtended by largely unvarying global frameworks, of East and West Bloc, of the North Atlantic Alliance and of nation-states in the Global North and South. In each case the hegemony of the governing entities was largely unquestioned. The overarching paradigm was not framed in terms of the civilizational superiority of the west, unlike earlier. Experience disclosed the resistance when American goods shipped to Europe under the Marshall Plan came with the logo 'For European Recovery - Supplied by the United States of America' (Bischof & Stiefel: 2009:8). However, despite the solidarity of wartime alliance, aid provoked not gratitude but envy and resentment, to say nothing of counter-propaganda from local opponents. But when the label of origin was removed, resistance diminished, Americans observed. The lesson was applied to the rest of the world. The new term of choice was modernization, an evolutionary process with no particular source and whose benefits would sooner or later reach everyone.

Modernization's outcomes were uneven, but media growth occurred across the world, at a rate that accelerated after the end of the Cold War. Political transformation accompanied these changes, as state governments retreated from the costs of social welfare, and media expansion destabilized the foundations of developmentalist regimes, and new party formations emerged. In these emergent formations, appeal to inherited identity was frequent, reinforced through xenophobic aggression towards minorities. Cold War communicationism foresaw regime stability (Rajagopal, 2020). When political

parties began to compete to utilize media power, populist counterrevolution became a likely outcome.

In the following section, I will very briefly discuss the emergence of Hindu nationalist populism in India, as one example of how media growth in the Global South could have popular outcomes that were in important respects, undemocratic and authoritarian. As the world's largest single-country contributor to the world's poor, India was a special focus of persuasion by the rival superpowers during the Cold War (Engerman, 2018). Its nearly uninterrupted record of retaining democratically elected governments since independence, together with an economy dominated by the private sector, has arguably made it a favored example of capitalist success in the Global South. Some of the similarities between the forms of its national politics and those of the United States in recent times however, are striking. They illustrate the fact that the most spectacular near-term outcome of media convergence, which the digital era augured, has been the occupation of government by reactionary political elements in both the Global North and South, albeit dressed in populist guise.

Populism in India

With populism, it is remarkable that similar forms of politics are being diagnosed in the world's most powerful country, and one of the poorest countries, simultaneously. Modernization had for decades after World War Two been conceived as convergent, to the extent that similar norms and values were expected to take root across more countries. Contemporary populism registers if anything the opposite: the refusal to converge, on the basis that what was believed most precious to a nation would be lost, and in fact was already at risk, principally through appeasement of minorities. Space forbids a detailed account of the developments that led to such an outcome. A few points are worth noting however.

Although India maintained a stance of non-alignment vis-à-vis the superpowers, the forms of aid and expertise provided by the U.S. towards modernization had lasting effects. Those in the highest echelons of society were wooed with prestigious positions on international bodies, and brought into an international circuit of decision-making. With a Unesco

conference deciding in 1965 that India should be the first country to experiment with satellite communication, business tycoon Vikram Sarabhai was elected to head an initiative on the peaceful uses of outer space soon thereafter.[16] By 1969 NASA concluded an agreement with India's Space Research and Atomic Energy departments, both headed by Sarabhai, to provide the use of a communications satellite to build a national communications system for India.[17]

Such American favors granted to India affirmed the large pool of expertise within the country, while the idea that they could join the front ranks of the world's nations was flattering to elites, and appealed to nationalist sentiments. Developing communication technologies also seemed like an answer to the huge problems of poverty and illiteracy in the country, and recognized that the Indian government would have to act swiftly to overcome those problems.

Enlarging communications infrastructure would challenge state regulatory capacity and disproportionately advantage already-dominant groups, but amidst the competitive dynamics of electoral democracy, the short-term lure of propaganda power was irresistible to the government. Over the last three decades, after satellite-based national broadcasting began in the late 1970s, the state agenda of secular socialist development morphed into an assertive Hindu nationalist program, fueled by big business, with middle class support. The Hindu nationalist assault on, and demolition of a 16th C. mosque, whose continued existence they alleged was an insult to Hindu pride, occurred three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Hindu ideologues declared the events to be parallel or similar, with Hindu assertion equated to post-Communist democratic assertion.

Despite its increasingly intolerant majoritarianism, India appears in some respects to confirm Western hopes from the early Cold War years: the largest poor country in the world is both capitalist and democratic. Meanwhile, the ruling party has taken pains to render Hindu identity into a public and psychological wage, that can be encashed through aggression against minorities, akin to W.E.B. Du Bois's account of "the public and psychological wage" given to white workers in the United States (Du Bois 1998: 700). However, the Indian government has largely been spared the odium of an authoritarian label by western countries. Relevant here is the

ruling party's ability to retain a formally democratic façade amidst the increasing violence of its majoritarian program, and inseparable from this ability is its media management. The commercial media, overwhelmingly owned by socially conservative upper-caste business families, had nevertheless had a record of political independence. A combination of ideological pressure and intimidation turned the media, over time, into a propaganda machine with a potency not witnessed before in the Indian context (Rajagopal 2017).

Active opinion management has been important in this process, using *double entendre* and redefining Hindu nationalism, when necessary, as merely the surface of unexceptionable political values. It is no surprise that the late Hindu nationalist leader, Arun Jaitley, privately informed an American diplomat stationed in New Delhi that Hindu nationalism was an opportunistic issue for the party, a 'talking point' rather than core ideology.[18] Organized Hindu nationalism had remained on the fringes of anticolonial nationalism, and played little part in the struggle for political independence. Its concerns are mainly internal, defining itself through opposition to Muslims, Christians and Communists. Not surprisingly they avoid mobilizing on economic issues, which were historically central to Indian nationalism, and that inform religious nationalism for instance in the Middle East, where anti-American or anti-Western issues can often be noticed. Hindu nationalist campaigns are mainly directed at internal enemies. They cultivate popular anger against convenient minority targets, and the surplus of aggression generated in the process also helps to police internal dissent. Meanwhile the foreign powers that Indian nationalists had in an earlier era challenged, receive a treatment that in an older political literature used to be called comprador, implying a foreign agent. In the process, 'the people' come to visibility chiefly as a media spectacle. Let me explain.

Global capital today seeks to incorporate nationalism as a means for its advance, amidst much drama and uncertainty. For example, the most prominent episodes of populism in recent Indian history, namely the anti-corruption movement led by the grassroots leader Anna Hazare in 2011, and the anti-rape mobilization in 2012, drew millions of campaigners across town and country. The Indian media and entertainment industry chose to promote these campaigns, by their own account, to enlarge media use. The irony is that active

resistance rather than passive consumption paved the way for this techno-political spread. It could be read as dissent against the government, but from another angle, Indians appeared to have arrived on the global arena, peacefully and colorfully protesting specific social issues, while steering away from explosive political questions. Not surprisingly, industry chroniclers, who represent a form of expertise in a multinational corporate setting, cite these developments as evidence of their success.[19]

Media Effects

The idea of the people had earlier seemed sufficient to drive 'metaphysical and theological abstractions out of politics'; what was left was 'man,' Ernest Renan observed, in an 1882 lecture on the idea of the nation. And what lastingly joined men and women together was not language, race, or religion, nor was it territory or material interest, he said; it was a spiritual principle constituted by the joining of past and present.[20]

Reading Renan, one is struck by how long it has taken to acknowledge the metaphysical confusion around the role of technology in making modern political community possible. Liberal nationalism depended on the fact that print publics were becoming influential, but Renan did not mention its technological dependence nearly a century after its emergence. Since at least the postwar period, newer technologies helped to make politics more volatile and more porous to authoritarian forms of rule. Just as the liberal model of the nation began to be dismantled in the late twentieth century, ironically, Benedict Anderson identified 'print capitalism' as the basis for nationalism's virtues (1983). By the time his formulation arrived the phenomenon it referred to was on the wane, but few mentioned it, in the large literature following his intervention.

It turned out that metaphysics, driven out by the category of 'the people', came right back in with another term arriving alongside the people. The nation too was a metaphysical abstraction, made tangible through socio-political and technical forms (Deutsch, 1953). The rules by which these forms became manifest, whether popular acclamation of absolute rulers or mass insurgency for change, linked past and present in order to make sense of the world. Embedded here was the idea of a forward movement in history, as inexorable as the flow of time.

Technology was proof and prop for this belief; its growth was evidence that we were headed to a future within reach. But technological growth does not leave the sense of time unchanged.

Rather than taking us forward into a new future, the media undertake a churning, by bringing buried layers of the past closer to the surface (Zielinski 2006). Which aspects of the past exert their power and when can't be told in advance; in this sense communication technologies dramatize the non-linearity of history, and multiply the points of time in the past that can be activated and made significant once more. Memories of past defeat as well as glory can become issues of the moment, in order to make America great again or Hindus proud again. Contemporary populists are hardly contemporary with their own times. But each cause they espouse is couched in terms of news reports and socio-economic data, where facts are held to be so obvious that no argument is possible or necessary. Realism is the governing norm for interpretation.

Nineteenth century realism arose against the governing prejudices of the age. Facts were on the side of progress, it seemed, as when Marx and Engels wrote: 'Man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind' (1848). Many developments have complicated this relationship between sensory perception and politics, but two events stand out, namely the decision to promote and expand the use of communication technologies, together with the political inhibition against exploring the implications and effects of these technologies.[21] Today 'news' bearing little relationship to certifiable reality can be circulated and treated as facts. Competing reality-claims denude the status of realism, which can just as easily serve the purpose of counterrevolution today, it seems. The poorest migrants can be projected as criminals requiring extraordinary expenditures to prevent their ingress into the United States, while in India, 'cow-vigilantes' can effectively champion the rights of sacred animals as surpassing those of citizens. The question then would be to adjudicate across varying realist accounts of reality, as well as vigorous claims-making machineries at the same time.

Comedy and satire have been prominent in liberal responses to the growth of rightwing and nationalist political discourse in the U.S.; where facts have no purchase, belittlement and

mockery may find traction. It is symptomatic that there is no contest of ideas as such; facts have reigned supreme for so long, and established political divisions have endured for so many years that the need for debating ideas across camps seldom arises. 'America is not an idea. America is a country, with borders and citizens,' Bannon has said (Bannon, 00:19:00). Even 'economic nationalism' for him merely represents 'the maximization of value to the citizen' (Bannon, 00:10:23). Ideas turn into identities for endorsement or rejection, or are weighed like cash on the table. In each case the possibility for discursive engagement is rejected in advance: language is a weapon and not a medium for dialogue, in this view. Such a stance suggests the limits of political comedy and points to similarities with Soviet-era humor that, for all its subversiveness, amounted to philosophical grumbling and a means of coping with fate, rather than political engagement as such.

Conclusion

Scholars have observed an illuminating family resemblance between late socialist and post-Cold War liberal, or late liberal discourse. In both contexts, they have argued, the governing ideology lost its referential link to the external world, and instead became a mechanism for reiterating statements about its overall adequacy irrespective of actual performance (Boyer & Yurchak, 2010).[22] For example, once socialism ceased to be a meaningful alternative to capitalism, liberal political discourses did not cease to adopt a defensive posture, nor did they begin to explore a wider range of options unburdened by the long history of polemics against socialism. Rather, they retained and even amplified the rhetorical maneuvers developed over half a century or more, solidified through professional training and media industry protocols that asserted the supremacy of capitalism and the unviability of its alternatives. Against all expectation, liberal capitalism turned into a closed ideological system that continued to affirm itself although it took its shape through interaction with socialism, and although in the absence of a competing system, self-congratulation is nostalgic at best. By way of answer, contemporary populists capitalize on the widening gap between liberal claims and 'facts on the ground,' and offer varieties of exclusionary programs, as if daring liberals to shed their pretense of consensus and unleash their police powers.

If right-wing populism claims to stand for 'the people,' the challenge should go beyond a sociological or demographic to a political notion of the people.[23] Here we have an outdated binary opposition between individuals who singly constitute the people, and the people as a mass or collective agent. Contemporary populists depend on the erstwhile rhetorical charge of the people as a mass, and, with bait-and-switch, present a select class of individuals as the real bearer of rights. The implicit aversion to the thought of socialism thus disadvantages liberals, and benefits their opponents, because the old conventions and limits on discourse continue and meanwhile no alternative political vision of the people is forthcoming.

Hence we confront the specter of 'commonism' (Buck-Morss, 2019) that right-wing politics threatens to make its own, and against which liberal responses have often had the stylized rigidity of Kabuki Theater: appreciated for their performance and lamented for their ineffectiveness. The problem pertains to politics as well as to media. Media markets seek to maximize the size of audiences, composed by serially linked individuals who then constitute a fictive mass, while the idea of the people as a collective agent remains politically powerful but exists unmoored from any guiding idea about a collective future, save perhaps of counterrevolution. Thus the contradictions of post-Cold War or late liberalism are both technological and political. The technological contradiction is presented in the networking of ever-larger masses at nearly zero marginal cost, but with an insufficiently imagined collective ethos. The political contradiction is that of confronting the inevitability of commonism, that is, some form of political collectivity that transcends liberal individualism, while also being determined to transcend the failures of the socialist past.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gresham%27s_law.

2. An exception is Hemant Shah (2011). *The Production of Modernization Theory: Daniel Lerner, Mass Media, and the Passing of Traditional Society*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

3. When such research did gain attention, it was seldom critically appraised, and tended to be regarded instead as information to be utilized in larger projects, of the kind funded by international agencies such as the United Nations and the World Bank. This was arguably the case with Singhal, Arvind and Rogers, Everett (2001), *India's communication revolution: from bullock carts to cyber marts.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

4. Similar themes are noticeable in HRW 2018, albeit on a less pessimistic note:
https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/201801world_report_web.pdf.

5. For a definitional approach to populism, see Müller, Jan-Werner (2016), *What is Populism?* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

6. I have discussed these points at some length in Rajagopal, 2020.

7. See e.g., Gerschenkron, Alexander (1962), *Economic backwardness in historical perspective: a book of essays*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

8. For a review that reiterates the Cold War binarism Hobsbawm painstakingly unravels, see Anderson, Perry (17 October 2002) 'Confronting Defeat' London Review of Books, 24, 20, pp. 10-17.

9. Carl Schmitt drew lessons from this history in his *The Concept of the Political* (1932, 2007) Chicago: University of Chicago Press. For relevant discussion see Toscano, Alberto

(2008). 'Carl Schmitt in Beijing: Partisanship, Geopolitics and the Demolition of the Eurocentric World.' *Postcolonial Studies* Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 417-433.

10. This is cited by Max Weber in his famous 1919 essay, 'Politics as a Vocation,' but it is to Weber that this idea is typically credited; its emergence from revolutionary politics tends to be forgotten. To offer only one example, the Wikipedia entry on the essay 'Politics as a Vocation' attributes the idea to Max Weber, and makes no mention of Trotsky. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_as_a_Vocation. Accessed Jan 18, 2019.

11. Lenin's publication of the secret treaties discovered when the Winter Palace was stormed, raised the ante further, leading to Wilson's Fourteen Points speech. For more, see Hannigan, Robert E. (2016-11-11). *The Great War and American Foreign Policy, 1914-24*. University of Pennsylvania Press: 125–129.

12. I do not have the space here to discuss Jürgen Habermas's influential work on the public sphere here. Suffice it to note that his omission of the Russian Revolution as a follow-up to the French episode of mass politics is significant, and indicates certain self-imposed limits on his argument's applicability.

13. Hence the irony that the French Revolution was studied intensively by subsequent insurgents, notably the Bolsheviks, whereas they completely ignored the far more successful American Revolution. See Arendt, Hannah (1963). *On Revolution*. New York and London: Penguin.

14. The first coinage I am aware of is in Albion, Robert G (1932). 'The Communication Revolution.' *American Historical Review* 37, no. 4: 718–20.

15. 'Communicationism,' ibid.

16. 'UN Panel on Space Parley Selects Indian as Chairman.' *New York Times*, February 9, 1967.

17. U.S., India Agree on Experiment in Instructional Television.' *The Department of State Bulletin LXI*, no. 1582 (October 20, 1969): 334–35.

18. The conversation, which occurred in 2005, was reported thanks to a leak of U.S. diplomatic cables reported in the press. Nambath, Suresh (March 26, 2011). 'The India Cables: Hindu Nationalism Is Opportunistic, Said Jaitley,' *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/news/the-india-cables/Hindu-nationalism-is-opportunistic-said-Jaitley/article14962641.ece.

19. On the media management of the anti-corruption campaign, see Rajagopal, Arvind (November 19, 2011) 'Visibility as a Trap in the Anna Hazare Campaign,' *Economic & Political Weekly*, pp. 19-21. On 'Nirbhaya' and media involvement, see *The power of a billion. Realizing the Indian dream* (March 31, 2013), FICCI-KPMG Indian Media and Entertainment Industry Report 2013, p.7. http://ficci.in/spdocument/20217/FICCI-KPMG-Report-13-FRAMES.pdf.

20. This is the text of a conference delivered by Ernest Renan, titled 'What is a Nation', at the Sorbonne on March 11th, 1882. Refer to Renan, Ernest (1992) *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* Paris, Presses-Pocket (translated by Ethan Rundell). http://ucparis.fr/files/9313/6549/9943/What_is_a_Nation.pdf. Accessed January 26, 2019.

21. See 'Communicationism', *ibid*.

22. Similarly in the case of the Soviet Union, substantive ideological change ceased after the death of Stalin, and political discourse became a closed circle of repetitive statements that were ritualistic rather than pragmatically efficacious. See Yurchak, Alexei (2006), *Everything Was Forever Until It was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

23. We can recall how with fiscal crisis, and the advent of leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, governments began to use the media to go beyond the erstwhile forms of administrative reason to reshape political consensus. Thus Thatcher's 'authoritarian populism' won popular approval for dismantling state welfare while strengthening the army and the police. In plain view, the state grew more illiberal and unequal, asserting the superiority of the market's wisdom over its own while invoking popular sovereignty and national pride.

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