

# A UTOPIAN VISION OF CONTEMPORARY GEOCULTURE\*

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The struggle for democracy can be regarded as a utopian political project which provides a vision of the future grounded in the notion of a common good. In *The Concept of Utopia*, Ruth Levitas (1991) describes Ernst Bloch's conception of anticipatory consciousness-a not-yet consciousness-which allows human beings to entertain hope for the future. Bloch sees the world in a constant state of change, the outcome of which is never predetermined; because of this he posits many future possibilities -not-yet becomes. Levitas (1991) explains that "utopia, as the expression of the not-yet conscious, reaches forward to the real possibility of the not-yet become and therefore is the catalyst of the future through its effect on human purpose and action."

As we approach the year 2000 nations are going through the convulsions marking the era dominated by the contest between attempts to operationalize two great utopian political ideologies-capitalism and communism. Although these ideologies were viewed as antagonistic, Emmanuel Wallerstein (1991) summarizes their commonalities: 1) they shared the heritage of the

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Enlightenment, 2) they shared the belief that people could rationally construct a good society; 3) they shared the idea that the state should be the focus of collective decision making, 4) they shared a secular view of the future, 5) they shared the ideal of selfdetermination and equality of nations, 6) they shared the view that universal values could exist which every person could support. They also shared a belief that democracy was the form of government that would ensure the greatest opportunity for the exercise of citizenship. Both ideologies have failed.

The economic collapse experienced in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was severe enough that the rival capitalist ideology is being embraced in desperation, regardless of the social and environmental consequences apparent in the west. As the victory of capitalism is proclaimed, what goes unmentioned, but fully understood, is that the promises of modernity offered by western industrialized nations have all too often proved false and that advanced capitalism too is a dying ideology. Communism's central failure, according to David Held (1987) is its reduction of political power to economic power and its refusal to recognize the dangers of maintaining accountability in a system of centralized power. Capitalism's central failure, Held (1987) continues, is its insistence on viewing markets as benign and its refusal to recognize the distortions of economic power. The failure of the operationalization of both ideologies in the east and in the west has caused human suffering, environmental devastation, and widespread political disillusionment and cynicism.

In order to explore the question of whether democracy is still possible, several changes in focus are occurring among critical theorists. First, there is a growing emphasis on culture in addition to economics, as an arena in which human agency may be exercised. And second, racism and sexism are being added to class as major sites of social contestation and identity formation, and as important constituencies in the struggle for the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. There is growing recognition that the interaction of

race, sex, and class that constitute the effects of intra and international post-colonialism form the basis for the real inequalities in the division of labor, access to education, distribution of power, and assumptions of morality (Giroux, 1988 & Wallerstein, 1991). In fact, the boundaries of nation states dissolve and effects of post-colonialism become geocultural. Now, nations of the "old world" as well as nations of the "new world" are multicultural and the struggle for citizenship involves the pressure of new groups against the resistance of old groups opposed to the extension of what used to be their rights and privileges (Barbalet, 1988). In the debate about the reconstitution of democracy, the political right decries the excesses of egalitarianism brought about by post-colonialism which they feel threaten to make societies ungovernable (LaClau and Mouffe, 1990). The right fears an adversary culture where equality of opportunity becomes equality of results, and where equality between individuals becomes equality between groups. However, the desire to maintain an individualist definition of rights could solidify the hierarchical relations which presently prevent the inclusion of various races classes and genders in full citizenship (LaClau & Mouffe, 1990). The left argues that valorizing the individual exercise of rights and ignoring the conditions that influence groups based on race, class, and gender, reinforces the very forms of exclusion associated with the accumulation of private property and wealth which created the need for the designation of equal citizenship in the first place (Hall & Held, 1989). For this reason, LaClau and Mouffe (1990) contend, "the left should not totally reject liberal democratic ideology, but should deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and truly plural democracy."

The traditional discourse about citizenship assumes the equality of citizens rights under the law, but as Hall & Held (1989) point out those "rights must be practically enacted and realized through actual participation in the community." Citizens rights are both civil and social. Civil rights protect the citizen's life from unjust interference by the state and social rights insure the benefits

guaranteed by the state (Barbalet, 1988). An interpretation of civil rights might be that there is no law which can prevent a person from buying property and social rights might protect that person from having their property taken from them illegally by another person; but the fact that only certain persons can afford to buy property to begin with is overlooked. In this case, as Hall & Held (1989) contend, "formal equity under the law may not translate to social practice." But if civil and social rights are not able to be practically applied, then as Hall & Held (1989) contend, liberty becomes an abstract principle without profound consequences in people's experience of everyday life.

In the old universalist conception of citizenship differences are absorbed into one common identity, but that ignores the variety of needs, and diverse histories, discourses, and practices that constitute the modern political subject. Therefore a new conception of citizenship must come to terms with difference and allow for the complex interplay of identities, desires, and needs of the various groups participating in a society. A redefinition of democracy should allow for an expansive view of citizenship where new rights can be added to a body of rights as new social forces introduce themselves into the national community (Barbalet, 1988). In modern democracies, the responsibilities of citizenship involve the participation in the exercise of political power through the electoral process and the agreement to abide by the laws determined by that democratically elected government (Barbalet, 1988).

It is clear that citizens in media centric societies like the U.S. are no longer willing to uphold their responsibilities. Curtis Gens, director of the Washington based Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, reports that that U.S. has the lowest rate of voter participation of any democracy in the world-less than 40% (Gens, 1988). Gens suggests that this may be the result of video politics. He asserts that citizens become spectators, entertained by the political melodrama, but not involved in the democratic process that it is supposed to promote.

However, as David Held (1987) states in *Models of Democracy*, people cannot escape from politics because it shapes and influences every aspect of their lives. It is at the center of the resolution or exacerbation of the problems people experience on a daily basis. Refusal to participate in politics merely lets things continue as they are. Held (1987) contends that politics is about power and about the ability of social agents to utilize power to transform their environment. Although, at present, politicians are not trusted and politics is associated with hypocrisy, no politics is not an option. People must empower themselves by transforming politics and the forces that constitute it in ways that enable them to shape and control their lives. In order to do this, Held (1987) contends, citizens must not only be willing to accept the fact that political life is a central part of their existence but also agree to participate in a system of collective decision making which maximizes involvement in public affairs. Such a system must promote discussion and debate leading to competition, contestation, and separation as well as mediation, negotiation, compromise, and affiliation between diverse groups struggling to realize their needs and desires as citizens of a pluralist democracy.

Although Habermas' idealized public sphere was restricted to the discussion of issues relevant to certain aspects of the life of the propertied classes, the notion of a neutral zone where access to information affecting multiple public goods is available, where discussion is free of both state and economic influence, and where groups expect to represent their views on an equal basis, is a powerful view of how the media could function in a democratic society (Curran, 1991). The media, and in particular television, are central to the formation of public opinion because they not only distribute, on a national scale, the information necessary for citizens to make informed choices, but also because they provide a national forum for debate. Therefore, they are logically the principle institutions of the public sphere in contemporary media centric societies (Curran, 1991).

However, if the media, and in particular television, are going to become revitalized public spheres in a new pluralist democracy, radical structural changes must occur. In order to create a neutral ground where the struggle for citizenship rights occurs in civil society, the media must be as independent as possible from both state and market influence. Only then can a complex articulation of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal channels of communication be possible between individuals, groups, and state and economic power structures (Curran, 1991).

John Keane (1991) and James Curran (1991) have developed models of new democratic media systems, which would allow for the contest of a plurality of opinions, experiences, histories, discourses, demands, and desires in a national arena. The main points of these models warrant consideration. Curran's model has three major features. First, the media must provide for public dialogue which includes a diversity of perspectives in both news and entertainment programs. The media should enable groups to interrogate their social experience and question dominant cultural myths about their identities. If people could explore what it is like to be "other," then arguments opposing ideological subordination might be understood and supported by empathetic coalitions. Second, the media should invigorate civil society by assisting various organizations to operate as representatives for the views of their supporters. As agencies of representation, media could facilitate the expression of alternative viewpoints. Third, the media should facilitate democratic procedures for achieving collectively agreed upon aims, like informing the electorate about political choices. But rather than reinforcing a single national identity and promoting universal values, the media should promote collective self-reflection and encourage critique and dissent so that an informed public opinion can influence matters of state.

Curran's model includes a core public sphere consisting of competing publicly owned media organizations. Feeding this core are connections to different organizations in civil society such

as a civic media sector, which would include media linked to collective organizations like political parties, subcultural media like magazines for minority groups, and organizational media like trade union newsletters; a professional media sector, where committed social service organizations would employ journalists to work on their behalf to heighten people's social consciousness; a private enterprise sector, where competition between commercial media would be encouraged but regulated, so that it would not dominate the system, and a social market sector, where new forms of programming unrepresented elsewhere would be allowed to flourish, similar to channel 4 in Britain.

Curran's model would not only provide a public forum for debate, but also provide the network to link groups to this forum, as well as providing room for a variety of extra-political experiences and performances.

The aim of John Reane's model for public service media is the development of a publicly funded self-organizing, cosmopolitan civil society which is not dominated by commodity production or by the state. Keane's public access media would be central to the social life of such a civil society. It would break down media monopolies, lift restrictions on audience choices of programs, and promote itself as an instrument of public good enabling people to both receive and send a plurality of opinions. Media access by minority groups would be assured by regarding media organizations as common carriers and guaranteeing certain open access hours. Democratic decision making procedures would guide program development and editorial choices. These democratic procedures, such as including representatives from relevant social groups would also be applied to the organizational structures of media corporations in the selection of boards of directors and managers. Both Keane and Curran support the subsidy of small newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations supporting minority opinions, in order to strengthen the foundations of a pluralistic civil society.

These new visions of the media as revitalized public spheres functioning as integral parts of pluralist democracies rest on the premise that media should be instrumental in the struggle between various social forces for the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. But how will the public be prepared to take part in this public sphere. The example of the U.S. a colonized country populated by native peoples, colonizers, immigrants, and slaves, indicates that plurality can be embraced symbolically but is extremely difficult to achieve in reality. Racism, classism, and sexism have been malignant forces in the U.S. for hundreds of years. European nations, now in the post-colonial era, are beginning to experience the intractability of the fear of difference that the "new world" has known for some time. This realization comes about as old universalist claims about the cohesiveness of nationality are being challenged and the acceptance of difference is being recognized as essential for democracy's survival. Many people are not prepared to value difference, nor are they prepared to accept the need for confrontation and contest. These new ideas run counter to the soothing platitudes about everyone being part of the melting pot. It is frightening to recognize that some aspects of cultural differences just don't melt down. Dealing with difference presents a challenge to the vision of pluralist democracy. Before citizens can participate in a revitalized public sphere, they need to be educated about difference and its role in the process of acquiring the rights of citizenship.

It must be recognized that it is very difficult, sometimes incommensurably so, for cultures to co-exist in a democratic community. Homi Bhabha (1990) asserts that cultures articulate, not because of similarities of behaviors or attitudes or even because of empathy or morality. The common ground lies in the fact that all cultures are symbol forming, subject constituting, interrelative practices. The act of translation between cultures, sets up "a third space" which displaces the histories of the cultures that produce it and creates a new structure in which to develop political

initiatives (Bhabha, 1990). The inventions of language and the uses to which new discourses are put is central to people's ability to define themselves in relation to both their natural and social environment (Ngugi wa Thiong 'O, 1986). In this sense, the establishment of new discourses that allow people to think about themselves and others in new ways becomes a condition for human agency. Agency remains the central issue in revisioning democracy because people must feel so strongly about possibilities for positive change in the future, that they take action in the present. In the words of Paulo Freire (1985), "a true revolutionary project, on the other hand, to which the utopian dimension is natural, is a process in which people assume the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and recreating the world."

A third space must be created in the public sphere where new discourses can be used to define subjectivity, identity, and politics in the hegemonic struggle of critical citizens toward a true pluralistic democracy. People must be moved to translate hope into agency. A radical democratic mass media could provide the space for the reawakening of hope.

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