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Natalie Fenton

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Mediating hope New media, politics and resistance

● Natalie Fenton

Goldsmiths, University of London, England

ABSTRACT ● In an attempt to reimagine the concept of resistance in media studies this article argues for a reconsideration of the concept of political hope in non-mainstream mediated political mobilization that will take us beyond a focus on resistance to one of political project(s). The critical first step in such an endeavour is to reach beyond the confines of media and communication studies. This article draws on political science, sociology, social movement studies and cultural geography, among other subjects, to consider the ways in which new media may allow a reimagining of hope so that a collective consciousness can be developed and maintained. In doing so the article suggests that if, as scholars, we wish to enhance our political purchase then the notion of resistance in media and communication studies should be made to engage with the struggle of changing the terms of the polity. ●

KEYWORDS ● commonality ● hope ● interactivity ● new media ● new social movements ● participation ● politics ● protest ● resistance ● universality

Introduction

On reading an interview with Stuart Hall printed in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* on 3 March 2006 I was struck by a deep sense of political despondency. Although he does not name it as such Hall is referring to the felt experience of neo-liberalism, the lack of political community and the way in which the social has been transposed into the individual, society into the market:

For the first time I feel like a dinosaur. Not in regard to the particular things or the particular programmes I believe in. But there's been a shift. The points of reference that organized my political world and my political hopes are not around any more. The very idea of the 'social' and the 'public' has been specifically liquidated by New Labour [...] But what makes it complicated is that there are plenty of references in New Labour to building up community. They have bought the language and evacuated it. Progressive politics is in their mouth every day. Community is in their mouth every day. Reform has been absorbed by them and reused in quite a different way. It's that transvaluation of all the key terms, that linguistic move that New Labour has made that presents anyone who is trying to take a critical approach with a tremendous problem. What terms can you use to speak about your objections? [...] Of course there are sites of resistance but I don't see how they cohere as a political programme, as a philosophy, even a statement. I don't see anyone who thinks they might try to articulate such a statement. [...] I am not so disillusioned as to think that history is finished. But I do think that what Gramsci would call the 'balance of social forces' are very powerfully against hope. (cited in Taylor, 2006)

The thesis that Hall is hinting at is a complex one that refers to privatization, deregulation and individualization, but the crux of part of what he suggests lies in the mode of mediated political communication and how it contributes to a diffuse alienation of citizens from politics. In a recent paper Habermas (2006) has called this:

.... the intrusion of the functional imperatives of the market economy into the 'internal logic' of the production and presentation of messages that leads to the covert displacement of one category of communication by another: Issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment. Besides personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarization of conflicts promotes civic privatism and a mood of anti-politics. (Habermas, 2006: 27)

This is now a common refrain in political communications. The debate often begins with the nature of democracy itself. Within liberal democracies power is gained by winning elections. Winning elections requires persuasion, which means engaging in impression management – what Louw (2005) refers to as 'image making, myth making and hype' on behalf of elite political actors. The media, hungry for news fodder, routinely access and privilege elite definitions of reality and are claimed to serve ruling hegemonic interests, legitimize social inequality and thwart participatory democracy.

There are many other contributory factors to this political malaise. Cottle (2003) claims that commercial television news is primarily a commodity enterprise run by market-oriented managers, who place outflanking the competition above journalistic responsibility and integrity. It is charged with

being in the business of entertainment, attempting to pull audience for commercial not journalistic reasons, setting aside the values of professional journalism in order to indulge in the presentation of gratuitous spectacles and images that create superficiality while it traffics in trivialities and deals in dubious emotionalism. In other words, mainstream news has systematically undermined the crucial arrangement that is meant to operate between a working democracy and its citizens. This, it is claimed, has contributed forcefully to our political disenchantment.

Hall acknowledges that there are sites of resistance but bemoans the fact that they do not come together to form a political programme. It could also be claimed that as media scholars we have been guilty of augmenting this political dissipation. In the field of media, communication and cultural studies being oppositional or active social agents has invariably come under the banner of 'resistance'. The active audience *resists* the hegemonic representation in the text. Subcultures form acts of *resistance* displaying their profound aversion to particular socio-political conditions in various ways. Journalists *resist* owner and editorial preferences through the sharing of collective professional values. Alternative media *resist* the frames, codes and practice of mainstream media through forms of organization, the means of production and modes of distribution.¹ We look for resistance in every form of mediation and every act of consumption to satisfy ourselves that we are not cultural dupes beholden to the edicts of the market and the state. We rarely, however, extend the identification of resistance (which is itself often contested) into the actual development and deliberation of a new politics and the world of the political public sphere.²

There are instances such as when a new technology enters the public domain that the possibility for harnessing it for progressive political ends is claimed as the next site of hope. The internet, as with many new technologies before it, has been imbued with a sense of optimism that can somehow transcend the trends of market politics. This new medium, it is claimed, has reinvented transnational activism. The internet with its networked, additive, interactive and polycentric form can accommodate radically different types of political praxis from different places at different times, offering a new type of political engagement. This apparently new mediated politics of the 21st century holds a promise of political hope. Is it any different from any other forms of resistance and political utopian sentiments identified previously in other forms of 'new' media?

If it is to be conceived of as any different then we have to examine it with different criteria than have often been used to think about resistance in the field to date. In an attempt to reposition the concept of resistance in media studies, this article attaches it firmly to a quest for political mobilization. In other words, what happens to the act of resistance? Does it remain a personal fantasy that allows us to imagine a better world but with no realistic prospects of ever achieving it? Does it survive and sustain as a domestic necessity, making a life of oppression more bearable (thereby inadvertently

upholding the status quo)? Or does the act of resistance translate into a political project with both a vision and a means of material realization? For a viable political project to emerge requires a collective social and political imaginary that can offer a sense of hope worth aiming for. A reconsideration of the concept of political hope in mediated political mobilization takes us beyond a focus on resistance to one of political project(s).

This article considers ways in which new media may allow a reimagining of hope so that a collective consciousness can be maintained and developed in this complex, confusing and contradictory tangle of mediation, politics, culture and community. In doing so, I suggest that if, as scholars, we wish to enhance our political purchase then the notion of resistance in media and communication studies should be made to engage with the struggle of changing the terms of the polity.

Popular mobilization and the internet

In the age of the internet, as more and more New Social Movements (NSMs) seek to organize and campaign on line, the question arises whether or not the internet can bring about a new form of political activism with consequences for the way we conceive of and carry out our political citizenship. The internet is now home to a multitude of groups dedicated to objecting to and campaigning against particular issues and politics. Public communications on line are part of the process of realizing the public sphere – a space where democracy can be enacted – allowing us to analyze how shared democratic values and identification as democratic citizens are achieved and maintained; how political/civic cultures are generated – essentially, to imagine how civil society can organize democratically for politically progressive ends (Habermas, 1989). The internet has become home to mediated activity that seeks to raise people's awareness, to give a voice to those who do not have one, to offer social empowerment, to allow disparate people and causes to organize themselves and form alliances, and ultimately to be used as a tool for social change. The characteristics that have been claimed to mark out the internet as particularly suited to contemporary transnational political activism can be expressed by the dual themes of multiplicity and polycentrality; interactivity and cross-border participation. These themes relate directly to online protest and cut across and connect with the themes of particularity and universality; commonality and difference – central issues that frame prevailing dilemmas in building political mobilization and establishing political projects.

Multiplicity and polycentrality

Klein (2000) argues that the internet facilitates international communication among non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and allows protesters to

respond on an international level to local events while requiring minimal resources and bureaucracy. This occurs through the sharing of experience and tactics on a transnational basis to inform and increase the capacity of local campaigns. According to Klein, the internet is more than an organizing tool. It is also an organizing model for a new form of political protest that is international, decentralized, with diverse interests but common targets.

Salter (2003) claims that the internet is a novel technological asset for democratic communications because of its decentred, textual communications system with content most often provided by users. On this basis it accords with the requisite features of new social movements that have grown out of a decrease in party allegiances and class alliances. NSMs are more fluid and informal networks of action than the class and party politics of old. They are based in but spread beyond localities; are usually non-hierarchical, with open protocols, open communication and self-generating identities. Such networks are often staunchly anti-bureaucratic and anti-centralist, and suspicious of large organized, formal and institutional politics. NSMs share common characteristics with web-based communication – they lack membership forms, statutes and other formal means of organizing; they may have phases of visibility and phases of relative invisibility; NSMs may have significant overlaps with each other and are liable to rapid change in form, approach and mission. Furthermore, the ability of new communication technologies to operate globally and so respond to global economic agendas is key to their contemporary capacity to mobilize against the vagaries of global capital.

One much-quoted example is the anti-globalization (also referred to as the alter-globalization or social justice) movement that gained public recognition at what is now commonly referred to as 'The Battle of Seattle'. On 30 November 1999 an alliance of labour and environmental activists congregated in Seattle in an attempt to make it impossible for delegates to the World Trade Organization (WTO) conference to meet. They were joined by consumer advocates, anti-capitalists and a variety of other grassroots movements. Simultaneously, it is claimed that nearly 1,200 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in 87 countries called for the wholesale reform of the WTO, many staging their own protests in their own countries (*The Guardian Online*, 25 November 1999, p.4). Groups integrated the internet into their strategies. The International Civil Society website provided hourly updates about the major demonstrations in Seattle to a network of almost 700 NGOs in some 80 countries (Norris, 2002). The demonstration was heralded as a success for transnational internet activism in terms of the reach and scope of the mobilization, the obstruction to the WTO conference and the networks for political activism that emerged as a result.

Interactivity and participation

Facilitation of participation is a crucial factor in transnational internet activism. But the interactivity of the internet can also impact upon the internal

organization of the social movement organizations through forging alliances and coalitions across different movements, and sharing best practice and most effective campaign techniques that can change the way groups organize and operate. Similarly, the protest activity and alliances of social movements on the ground can affect the way in which the internet is used and structured on the various and multiple websites. For example, the People's Global Action (PGA) organization, formed in 1998 by activists protesting in Geneva against the second Ministerial Conference of the WTO, and to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the multilateral trade system (GATT and WTO), is an attempt to create a worldwide alliance against neo-liberal globalization on an anti-capitalist platform. It is defined as 'an instrument for communication and coordination for all those fighting against the destruction of humanity and the planet by capitalism, and for building alternatives' (www.agp.org, March 2007). So far, the PGA's major activity has been coordinating decentralized Global Action Days around the world to highlight the global resistance of popular movements to capitalist globalisation. The first Global Action Days, during the 2nd WTO ministerial conference in Geneva in May 1998, involved tens of thousands of people in more than 60 demonstrations and street parties on five continents. Subsequent Global Action Days have included those against the G8 (18 June 1999), the 3rd WTO summit in Seattle (30 November 1999), the World Bank meeting in Prague (26 September 2000) and the 4th WTO summit in Qatar (November 2001). The PGA describes itself as an instrument for coordination, not an organization.

The capability of the internet to speed up and increase the circulation of struggle, the *raison d'être* of the PGA, has been argued as key to the success of some campaigns such as the anti-globalization movement (Cleaver, 1999). This circulation benefits from decentralization and autonomy of individual groups/campaigns that are at once inclusive and diverse but that produce a high degree of identification among citizens of the web. Another site, established in 1990 by various NGO and civil society networks – the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) – describes itself as 'the first globally interconnected community of ICT users and service providers working for social and environmental justice' (APC website). It states:

The Association for Progressive Communications is a global network of non-governmental organizations whose mission is to empower and support organizations, social movements and individuals in and through the use of information and communication technologies to build strategic communities and initiatives for the purpose of making meaningful contributions to equitable human development, social justice, participatory political processes and environmental sustainability. (www.apc.org/english/about/index.shtml, 2005)

The APC currently (2007) has 36 member networks serving more than 50,000 activists, non-profit organizations, charities and NGOs in over 133 countries with a strong mix of Southern and Northern organizations. These

large, decentralized and often leaderless networks facilitated by new communication technologies operate a form of politics that is based on the participation of all citizens rather than the hierarchical model of traditional politics (Fenton and Downey, 2003). 'Moreover, the essence of politics is considered the elaboration of "demands and responses" – constructing identities rather than "occupying power"' (della Porta, 2005: 201). The act of participation itself and engagement with a particular issue is the political purpose, rather than social reform or direct policy impact. Participation can be both on line and off line. But the online participation is often about moving people to action off line. It is about building relationships and forging community rather than simply providing information (Diani, 2001).

Participation in new social movements has also been linked to disengagement with traditional party politics. In her interviews with and questionnaires to activists, della Porta (2005) discovered a relationship between mistrust for parties and representative institutions with very high trust and participation in NSMs. The distinction between institutional politics and social movements rests upon the former acting as bureaucracies founded upon delegation of representation and the latter being founded on participation and direct engagement. This encourages us to move away from the notion of participative, deliberative democracy being realizable only through the traditional political structures of the nation state. If we think in terms of a decentred, polycentric democracy and reject the modernist version of a political project with a single coherent aim of social reform then 'a more fluid and negotiable order might emerge, with plural authority structures along a number of different dimensions rather than a single location for public authority and power' (Bohman, 2004: 148) for governance. The internet in Benkler's (2006) analysis has the potential to change the practice of democracy radically because of its participatory and interactive attributes. It allows all citizens to alter their relationship to the public sphere, to become creators and primary subjects, to become engaged in social production. In this sense the internet is ascribed the powers of democratization.

The capacity to maximize connectivity and interaction is *the* political act. Local organizations confined to localized actions realize that similar types of activity are taking place in locality after locality and by their participation they can contribute to reshaping these global networks for communication into global zones for interactivity (Sassen, 2004). As Melucci (1989: 173–74) reminds us, participation has a double meaning – it means both taking part 'to promote the interests and needs of an actor as well as belonging to a system, identifying with the "general interests" of the community'.

The largely optimistic perspective presented above can of course be contested. For Castells (1996), the globalization of the capitalist system does not open up the possibility of a labour-led emancipatory project. In his view, the network society results in labour becoming localized, disaggregated, fragmented, diversified and divided in its collective identity. Taking Castells' position, the fragmented nature of new media limits the capacity of new social

movements creating coherent strategies due to the increasing individualization of labour. Problems of quantity and chaos of information challenge the way that analysis and action are integrated in decision-making processes as well as existing configurations of power and collective identity in social movement organizations. Non-hierarchical forms of *disorganization* that make decisions on the basis of collective consensus become harder to achieve the larger and more disparate the collective is.

Furthermore, the internet may contribute to the fragmentation of civil society, as well as political mobilization and participation. Habermas registers his ambivalence towards new information and communication technologies as a potential source of participatory political communication:

Whereas the growth of systems and networks multiplies possible contacts and exchanges of information, it does not lead per se to the expansion of an intersubjectively shared world and to the discursive interweaving of conceptions of relevance, themes, and contradictions from which political public spheres arise. The consciousness of planning, communicating and acting subjects seems to have simultaneously expanded and fragmented. The publics produced by the Internet remain closed off from one another like global villages. For the present it remains unclear whether an expanding public consciousness, though centered in the lifeworld, nevertheless has the ability to span systematically differentiated contexts, or whether the systemic processes, having become independent, have long since severed their ties with all contexts produced by political communication. (Habermas, 1998: 120–1)

Greater pluralism is regarded by Habermas as a risk for deliberative democracy rather than its saviour. This concern is echoed by Sunstein, who argues that the internet has spawned large numbers of radical websites and discussion groups, allowing the public to bypass more moderate and balanced expressions of opinion in the mass media (which are also, he argues, subject to fragmentation for essentially technological reasons). Moreover, these sites tend to link only to sites that have similar views (Sunstein, 2001: 59). This is supported by other empirical work, such as that of Hill and Hughes (1998). Sunstein argues that a consequence of this is that we witness group polarization (2001: 65) that is likely to become more extreme with time. Sunstein contends that two preconditions for a well-functioning, deliberative democracy are threatened by the growth of the internet and the advent of multi-channel broadcasting. First, people should be exposed to materials that they have not chosen in advance. This results in a reconsideration of the issues and often recognition of the partial validity of opposing points of view. Second, people should have a range of common experiences, in order that they may come to an understanding with respect to particular issues (Downey and Fenton, 2003).

Sunstein recognizes that 'group polarization helped fuel many movements of great value – including, for example, the civil rights movement, the anti-slavery movement, and the movement for sex equality' (2001: 75). One could

argue that the internet may foster the growth of transnational enclaves of great value (for example, the environmental movement), but their value depends ultimately on how influential they become in the formation of public opinion beyond the radical ghetto (Downey and Fenton, 2003).

Although it may facilitate mobilization, the democratic potential of the internet is not dependent on its primary features of interactivity, multiplicity and polycentrality, which are often celebrated and heralded as offering intrinsic democratic benefit. Democratic potential is realized only through the agents who engage in reflexive and democratic activity. It is an enabling device that is as susceptible to the structuring forces of power as any other technology: 'It is false to say that individuals possess immediate control; they have control only through assenting to an asymmetrical relationship to various agents who structure the choices in the communicative environment of cyberspace' (Bohman, 2004: 142).

Atton (2004: 24) notes:

[T]o consider the internet as an unproblematic force for social change is to ignore the political and economic determinants that shape the technology; it is to pay little attention to how technological 'advances' may be shaped or determined by particular social and cultural elites (corporations, governments); and it is to ignore the obstacles to empowerment that legislation, inequalities of access, limits on media literacy and the real world situation of disempowerment necessarily place on groups and individuals.

Claims for the extension and reinvention of activism must be considered in the context of the material social and political world of inequality, injustice and corporate dominance. If it is true that a global civil society is developing on the web, it is one that is segmented by interest and structured by inequality. The pre-eminent users of global communication networks remain the efforts of corporations and governments to strengthen the dominant economic regime. Issues of cultural and economic capital are ever prevalent. The ability to define and shape the nature of any movement often falls to those with the necessary social and educational resources. Many of the high-profile protests take place at distant locations – only those protesters with funds for travel can get to them. And as these protests are often organized on the internet, the economic and cultural resources involved in the use of this technology also exclude many potential participants, probably those suffering the most impact from the very thing being protested against (Crossley, 2002). Nonetheless, impressive numbers of activists who use the internet *have* found creative ways to communicate their concerns and to contest the power of corporations and transnational economic arrangements.

Constructing global solidarity and reimagining hope

The problem, however we approach it, is how fragmented and multiple oppositional groupings can function together for political ends. Can loose,

multi-issue networks progress from a resistance identity to a political project that is democratic, sustainable and likely to produce social change? The danger in constructing global solidarity on line, as Tarrow (1998) points out, is that the speed at which social movement actors can respond and the short-term and rapidly shifting issues that are their focus (rather than fully fledged ideologies) do not lend themselves to long-standing commitments or deeply held loyalties, but a following that is also fleeting and momentary. This sort of issue drift, whereby individuals or groups can shift focus from one issue to another or one website to another, raises the question of whether global civil society has a memory that can retain a collective political project. The ultimate problem that arises is how to ensure that non-hierarchical, open and participatory movements are also effective in influencing public policies. Habermas has argued that solidarity at this level cannot simply be based on shared moral conceptions of human rights but only on a shared political culture (Habermas, 2001: 126); that political culture is constituted not only of social agents who can enable the mediation of dialogue across borders and publics but also institutions that can translate those claims into a reality.

As feminist theorists have noted (Braidotti, 1991; Fenton, 2000; Spivak, 1992), for political efficacy there must be more than the apparent freedom that comes with embracing difference and diversity, more than just an increase of instances of mediated protest or opposition. Even if we accept the possibility for fragmented and multiple oppositional groupings that can create their own political interventions via the internet, we still have to broach the next stage: how will a politics of solidarity in difference be realized? Social solidarity can be described as a morality of cooperation, the ability of individuals to identify with each other in a spirit of mutuality and reciprocity without individual advantage or compulsion, leading to a network of individuals or secondary institutions that are bound to a political project involving the creation of social and political bonds. There must be a commitment to the value of difference that goes beyond a simple respect and involves an inclusive politics of voice and representation. It also requires a non-essentialist conceptualization of the political subject as made up of manifold, fluid identities that mirror the multiple differentiations of groups.

Such mediated solidarity is evident in the research of social movement theorists. Tarrow and della Porta (2005: 237) refer to the interconnections between online and offline participation as 'rooted cosmopolitans' (people and groups rooted in specific national contexts but involved in transnational networks of contacts and conflicts); 'multiple belongings' (activists with overlapping memberships linked with polycentric networks); and 'flexible identities' (characterized by inclusiveness and a positive emphasis on diversity and cross-fertilization). Participants in these movements are drawn together by common elements in their value systems and political understandings, and hence by a shared belief in narratives that problematize particular social phenomena (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; della Porta and Diani, 1999).

If multiplicity and polycentrality, interactivity and participation are the central organizing themes of new media and the mediation of hope, the central organizing themes of discussions around new politics and resistance rest on the twin axes of particularity and universality; commonality and difference. Although these terms are often used interchangeably (particularity with difference; universality with commonality), it is helpful analytically to understand the distinction between them. Particularity and universality refer to the space and reach of new media and politics – whether an oppositional politics can operate outside of a particular location, transcend spatial (and often economic, social and political) boundaries and be conceived of or perceived as universal. Commonality and difference refers to political subjects – although we each may have different political identities, can we have a politics in common?

Particularity and universality

To extend the concept of mediating hope we need a critical appreciation of time and space. Time provides us with historical context that helps us to trace the development of politics and political identities and how they are contingent upon social and political context. Space reminds us of concerns of geographical materialism and brings to the fore issues of distance and proximity – the space between us that establishes difference and generates particular and local political concerns and the space that brings us together on common ground with universal concerns.

Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) deal with the dilemma between universality and particularity through the notions of the Multitude and the common. Calling on us to reclaim the concept of democracy in its radical, utopian sense: the absolute democracy of ‘the rule of everyone by everyone’ (2004: 307), the Multitude, they argue, is the first and only social subject capable of realizing such a project. They propose a description of the Multitude as ‘an open network of singularities that links together on the basis of the common they share and the common they produce’ – a union which does not in any way subordinate or erase the radical differences among those singularities.

Brought together in multinodal forms of resistance, different groups combine and recombine in fluid networks expressive of ‘life in common’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 202) – they form a multitude. The Multitude is a heterogeneous web of workers, migrants, social movements and non-governmental organizations – ‘potentially ... all the diverse figures of social production’ (p. xv), ‘the living alternative that grows within Empire’ (p. xiii). The Multitude is not the people per se, but rather many peoples acting in networked concert. Because of both its plurality and the sharing of life in common controlled by capital, it is claimed that the Multitude contains the composition of true democracy. This is a network analysis well suited to the webbed communication of the internet.

Hardt and Negri argue that the shift from industrial to post-industrial societies has been accompanied by a shift in the dominant form of labour,

from industrial labour to more 'immaterial' forms of work – the production of social relations, communication, affects, relationships and ideas. It produces and touches on all aspects of social, economic, cultural and political life and is profoundly reorganizing many aspects of our lives, including the very ways we interact and organize ourselves. They propose that this labour increasingly produces 'the common' – the basis upon which any democratic project will be built. The Multitude's ability to communicate, form alliances and forge solidarity – often through the very capitalist networks that oppress it – allows it to produce a common body of knowledge and ideas that can serve as a platform for democratic resistance to Empire.

The shrinkage of the state through initiatives such as privatization, marketization and deregulation means that decision making has flowed away from public bodies and official government agencies that were directly accountable to elected representatives, devolving to a complex variety of non-profit and private agencies operating at local, national and international levels. It is claimed that it has become more difficult for citizens to use conventional state-oriented channels of participation, exemplified by national elections, as a way of challenging those in power, reinforcing the need for alternative avenues and targets of political expression and mobilization. Hardt and Negri point to anti-globalization and anti-war protests as exercises in democracy motivated by people's desire to have a say over decisions that impact upon the world in which they live – operating at a transnational level. However, their call for a 'new science of democracy' (2004: 348) is difficult to pin down. Exactly how the multitude can stand up and be counted is never set out. This is utopia without architecture and universality without meaning.

Much as in the debate on the radical political potential of the internet, this optimistic interpretation can be challenged. The economic, the political and the cultural may feed off each other to the extent that they become symbiotic relationships. These relationships may be interdependent but they are not equally mutually beneficial. It can be argued that markets and politics become intertwined so that what appears to be political may be no more than market-based activism. In other words, new forms of social militancy are allowed to arise within capitalism with no possibility of transcending it. Outward signs of protest can project an illusion of civility and democratic practice that ultimately has a civilizing influence on market and state rather than create a genuinely free space where political agency might be articulated and lead to a political project.

Taking this more critical view, Bauman (2003) argues that we are living in a world dominated by fear instead of hope – fear of collective disaster (bird flu, terrorism etc.) and fear of personal disaster – the humiliating fear of falling among the worst off or otherwise ostracized. As liquid moderns (Bauman, 2003) we have lost faith in the future, cannot commit to relationships and have few kinship ties. We incessantly have to use our skills, wits and dedication to create provisional bonds that are loose enough to stop suffocation, but tight enough to give a needed sense of security now that the traditional sources of solace (family, career, loving relationships) are less reliable than ever.

Bauman has consistently highlighted the decline of traditional political institutions and class politics, the rise of neo-liberalism and identity politics, and the fluid and fragmentary nature of social bonds and individual identity. These pressures contribute to both 'individualization' and narrow communitarianism, which Bauman perceives as eroding our capacity to think in terms of common interests and fates.

Central to Bauman's analysis is the notion that today's societies are integrated around consumption rather than production. Freedom is modelled on freedom to choose how one satisfies individual desires and constructs one's identity via the medium of the consumer market. As a consequence, freedom and individual fate have increasingly become 'privatized'. Yet an 'increasingly privatized life feeds disinterest in politics', whether one can afford to partake in consumer freedom or not. And politics freed from constraints deepens the extent of privatization, thus breeding 'moral indifference' (Bauman, 1994: 27).

At the same time, we live increasingly under conditions of globally and systemically engendered insecurity and uncertainty, which belie the promise of assertive individuality not only for the 'excluded' but for many of the 'included'. Even where politicians speak the progressive language of community and social regeneration, the ideal end point is modelled on consumer freedom and 'individual empowerment' that may in fact perpetuate insecurity and uncertainty rather than address its root causes. This is an echo of the Hall quote at the beginning of this article.

In promoting and idealizing the model of consumer freedom and individual responsibility, the Government replicates the logic of consumerism which promotes 'biographical solutions to socially produced afflictions'. Hence, for Bauman, the 'main obstacles that urgently need to be examined relate to the rising difficulties in translating private problems into public issues ... in re-collectivizing the privatized utopias of "life politics" so that that they can acquire once more the shape of the visions of the "good society" and "just society"' (Bauman, 2000: 51).

In this argument universality becomes based on consumption alone and particularity reduced to individualism. But this need not deny that politics can be (or become) a vehicle for the translation of private troubles into public concerns and the democratically generated search for collective solutions. The challenge now is to bring politics and power back together again (Bauman, 1999, 2002). This is something the anti-globalization movement has sought to tackle but it has done so through a politics of protest often bereft of a political programme.

The growing, 'civic disengagement' from state politics – the kind of politics that has been developed through modern history to fit and serve the political integration into 'nation-states' – has shifted political interests and hopes to new terrains that are borderless and global. They are also sorely under-regulated and ethically and politically uncontrolled. The problem then becomes – can ethically under-regulated and politically uncontrolled global counter-politics

produce a universal ethics with particular relevance and material realization within and across borders?

Commonality and difference

For Bauman political hope would be forged through a shared life of continuous and multi-faceted relationships that would reinvigorate moral responsibilities and awaken the urge to shoulder the task of managing common affairs. In this approach caring for the preservation of diversity is the very purpose of shared politics. If separate identities refuse *exclusivity* they abandon the tendency to suppress other identities in the name of the self-assertion of one's own, while accepting that it is precisely the guarding of other identities that maintains the diversity in which their own uniqueness can thrive. Universality always exists in relation to particularity; commonality always exists in relation to difference. For example, the notion of justice gains universality in abstraction from particular circumstances but becomes particular again as soon as it is realized in social practice. This is a constant tension in politics. Learning to deal with spatial difference (in a cultural geographic sense) and coordinate contradictory politics (at the local and national, national and cross-border, national and global levels) is crucial to the articulation of socialist politics.

But how do we move from micro-politics to macro-politics? As noted above, NSMs have been criticized for being too narrow and fragmentary in their practice and in their purpose; for dealing with short-term issues with short-term fixes and for not being agencies of long-term and fundamental transformations. Because of their insistence on particularity and a politics of localism which is often exclusionary and sometimes populist-nationalist, they are easy to tumble and ignore and stand accused of offering false hope (Harvey, 2000). They are seen as non-cumulative and non-integrative and based on individual sufferings and grievances:

... it is fleeting, one-off, thin, single issue sentiments of justice, not full-blooded, comprehensive, solid models of justice. They exacerbate the fragmentation of the political scene. But they are the last soldiers on the battlefield ... (Bauman, cited in Smith, 1999: 196)

The exacerbation referred to above can be argued to increase with reliance on the internet. As noted earlier, the internet can be argued to encourage loose bonds and fleeting connections. The sheer mass of information and counter-politics on line threatens to drown the causes they stand for – quantity outstrips quality at every successive click. This is in sharp contrast to the position of Hardt and Negri, who see networks of commonality round every corner and attribute to their distinctive nature a particular power: the dynamism of networked pluralism. But I have also argued that relying on networks to coalesce into political projects spontaneously is implausible and, worse, denies organization and structure. Unger notes how

faith in the spontaneous creative powers of revolutionary action have disarmed the constructive political imagination of the left [...] the few who try to work out alternatives more considered than those found in the party platforms of the mainstream of leftist literature are quickly dismissed as utopian dreamers or reformist tinkerers [...] nothing worth fighting for seems practicable, and the changes that can be readily imagined often hardly seem to deserve the sacrifice of programmatic campaigns ... the would-be program-writer [...] will be accused [...] of dogmatically anticipating the future and trying to steal a march on unpredictable circumstance, as if there were no force to Montaigne's warning that 'no wind helps him who does not know to what port he sails'. (1987: 443)

Hope, it would seem, is thin on the ground. But despite this negative assessment there is at least the *potential* for multiplicity to be interpreted as diversity and translated into political inclusiveness. NSMs, with the help of the internet, are attempting to build a new moral fabric that seeks to break free from the shackles of privatization. But for this to happen, and for a politics of hope to emerge, requires a coherent expression and organization that will involve a degree of universality and the generation of a common vision. The anti-authoritarianism of liberatory political thought is endlessly limiting and fails to recognize that the materialization of anything requires closure around a particular set of institutional arrangements and a particular spatial form. This has left the concept of political hope as a pure signifier without any meaningful referent in the material world. Without the hope that can be invested in a vision of utopia there is no way to define the port to which we might want to sail. The utopian vision of Hardt and Negri rarely identifies agencies and processes of change. While they may be inspiring they do no more than move utopia further into the realms of fantasy. As Levitas argues, this may have the advantage of liberating the imagination from the constraint of what is possible to imagine as possible and encouraging utopia to demand the impossible, but it also severs utopia from the means of social change (Levitas, 1993).

Conclusion

Bloch (1988) argued for a revitalization of a utopian tradition, for without hope alternative politics becomes impossible. New social movements *do* offer a flicker of hope. But a hope that is predicated purely on the ability or possibility of resistance is short lived. Online activism runs the risk of raising our hopes without the likelihood of deliverance. We need to encourage the flicker of hope raised in the multiple acts of resistance into the flame of a political programme. To do so requires letting go of particularism. Realizing utopias – translating hope into practical political realities – inevitably results in something or someone being excluded. To 'materialize a space is to engage with

closure (however temporary) which is an authoritarian act' (Harvey, 2000: 183) – we have to find ways of living with this as a political act. This is inevitable even if it brings with it disillusionment. Small hopes that relate to a particular situation and circumstance are necessary for localized progress. Political protest and political progress on a local scale are crucial. Small steps and fragments of hope are critical to social progress. Renouncing particularism does not mean either giving up on the local or consigning hope to the ephemerality of placelessness. But hope that insists on particularism will not create commonality or solidarity on the global scale required to contest the social and economic forces of global capitalism. If power is now played out in under-institutionalized global space but politics remains local, the prospects for contesting that power will remain weak.

In relinquishing particularism we must also forgo the multiplicity of heterotopia (Foucault, 1973). Heterotopia presumes that power/knowledge can be dispersed and fragmented into spaces of difference. Multiple and different sites of utopia can exist simultaneously yet we still have no idea what this heterogeneous utopia might look like or be described as, other than a morass of discrete, particular struggles. Without a common binding solidarity and a sustaining political programme, multiplicity results in no more than fragmentation and dispersal.

While we are busy relinquishing particularism and forgoing multiplicity, we must also be able to embrace and account for difference. As Brown (1995) and Riley (2000) suggest, the imagined communities of political speech are frequently deeply problematic. Hope that ignores difference is impossible to uphold and is more likely to implode and fragment further still.

Even as we try to fathom what this brave new world might be, we must be conscious that the geopolitics of global capitalism is in all of our imaginings. At the same time, we must find ways to reconnect the concept of hope to a referent in the material world. Hope needs to discover a politics. We need a vision of a better world that is practicable and possible, a politics that can claim power. If we want hope back (assuming we accept Hall's analysis at the beginning of this article that it is gone in the first place), if we want hope to be more than a utopian figment of our imagination, more than disparate acts of resistance, this is as much a task for media studies as it is for any academic discipline.

Notes

- 1 This is a crude summary of a variety of work that is far more nuanced and sophisticated than is given credit for here. But the point remains the same – research that recognizes resistance usually stops at the point of identification and falls short of a consideration of the potential for political project(s).
- 2 The political public sphere refers to the distinction made by Habermas (1989) between the literary/cultural public sphere and the political public sphere – the public sphere of the political realm.

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● **NATALIE FENTON** is a reader in the Department of Media and Communication, Goldsmiths, University of London where she is also co-director of the Goldsmiths Media Research Programme: Spaces, Connections, Control, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and co-director of Goldsmiths Centre for the Study of Global Media and Democracy. *Address:* Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, England. [email: n.fenton@gold.ac.uk] ●