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Introduction: Media and the Politics of Crisis

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On Crisis

The centrality of the media of mass communication to social life is something that we take for granted in the late twentieth century. The actual function one can attribute to media – their role in society – is highly contested, however.

Debates over the relationship of media to society have to do in good measure with diverging views of the nature of society itself. In the 1990s, one of the flashpoints of this debate concerns the juncture of 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' (cf. *Media, Culture and Society*, 1991) – that is to say, have we indeed crossed the threshold into an entirely new era, or are we rather in a later stage of the one that began politically with the great revolutions of the late eighteenth century, economically with the industrial transformations of the mid-nineteenth century, and culturally with the new artistic movements of the early twentieth century?

In short, is the present moment one of continuity or rupture with the past? Despite the intellectual attractiveness of the prospect of debating this question, we would propose that society evolves in a process of continuity *and* change, and that this process does not lend itself to such neat characterizations.

It is clear that such a process is not smooth. But we can nonetheless seek to understand it. We would propose the notion of *crisis* as a paradigm for understanding the dialectics of continuity and radical change (rupture), the thread (both real and imaginary) connecting social order and disorder in our times. This idea is suggested in M. Mattelart (1986).

The notion of crisis *as an analytical category*, Edgar Morin wrote in 1976, has spread to every horizon in the twentieth century: society, the family, value systems, the economy, the environment, the struggle with nature . . . all have been scrutinized from the perspective of crisis. A moment of crisis – by definition, a decisive moment – provides a unique opportunity for making a diagnosis, according to Morin (1976).

While we essentially agree with this view, the focus of this book will necessarily be more narrow than the panorama proposed by Morin. Our

concern is with *the politics of crisis*, in which, we shall argue, communications media play a central role. The notion of crisis is encountered in the literature in various guises pertinent to our consideration.

The question was addressed, for example, by the great Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1930), for whom situations of conflict between the 'representatives' and the 'represented' in society engendered a crisis of ruling class hegemony, a crisis of authority, or a general crisis of the state:

In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class's hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses . . . , or because huge masses . . . have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. (Gramsci, 1930: 210)

For Gramsci, a 'crisis of authority' arises when the ruling class no longer commands a social consensus, and must resort increasingly to coercive force to maintain its dominance. 'This means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously' (Gramsci, 1930: 276). This analysis begs the question: how does this come about? and indicates the importance of the means of exercising ideological hegemony.

Closer to our own day, Offe (1984) asks why the policy-making capacity of the state (ie its 'welfare state regulatory strategies') is so limited in effectiveness in late capitalist societies? For Offe, like Gramsci, the notion of crisis is central to the maintenance of hegemony:

the tantalizing and baffling riddle . . . is why capitalist systems have so far been able to survive – in spite of all existing contradictions and conflicts [crises] – even though an intact bourgeois ideology that could deny these contradictions and construct the image of a harmonious order [bourgeois hegemony] no longer exists. (Offe, 1984: 36)

His answer lies in the view of policy making as a form of crisis management. Crises, for Offe (1984: 36), are 'processes in which the structure of a system is called into question'. One view of crisis, which Offe calls the 'sporadic' view, holds that 'crises endanger the identity of a system', especially when events occur that lie outside the boundaries developed by the system. This view sees crises as 'particularly acute, catastrophic, surprising and unforeseeable events' requiring intervention. 'The crisis is thus seen as an event or a chain of events confined to one point in time or a short period of time. This makes it difficult to describe the *tendency towards crisis* or *crisis-proneness* of a social system' (Offe, 1984: 37). By failing to link events with social structures, it fails to see the crisis as *characteristic* of the general state of affairs.

An alternative, or 'processual', approach conceives crisis at the level of 'mechanisms that generate "events"': according to this approach, crises are

seen as 'developmental tendencies' that can be confronted and counteracted (for example, by policy measures). Here, the crisis-prone tendencies of the system are related to its overall characteristics. Crisis and administrative (state) intervention are traditionally pitted as opposites, but they are linked by what Offe (1984) calls the continuing 'crisis of crisis management'.

In an important essay first published in 1981, Jürgen Habermas described social modernization as a process of economic growth and organizational accomplishment that 'penetrates deeper and deeper into previous forms of human existence . . . disturbing the communicative infrastructure of everyday life' (Habermas, 1985: 8). To the extent that modern society is also marked by a seemingly endless series of crises – real and perceived, general and specific – this is a good way of characterizing the media–crisis relationship.

On Media and Crisis

Crisis can be defined as a disruption, real or perceived, of social order. In the dictionary sense, the term is also used to refer to a decisive or critical turning point in the course of events, as well as 'a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971: 1178). It is especially applied 'to times of difficulty, insecurity and suspense in politics or commerce'.

A state of crisis is distinguished from its opposite, normalcy, by the threat (or promise) of change that the crisis implies. Whether change is deemed to be desirable or not is evidently a question of ideological orientation and political interest, but the very labelling of some situation as a 'crisis' is itself an ideological and political act. So is the failure to attribute crisis status to a particular situation. Making these choices and structuring the way they are presented in the public sphere has become one of the essential functions of mass media.

If a situation of crisis is, axiomatically, a moment of importance for the society concerned, it is, by corollary, necessarily worthy of media attention. The nature of that attention then becomes, itself, an element of the crisis, insofar as 'the status and significance of a historical event . . . is inseparable from the equivocal discourses that traverse it' (Pêcheux, 1988: 633).

The role of media will vary greatly depending on the nature of the particular crisis and the nature of the particular society concerned. As all social institutions, media thrive on stability and are threatened by change. But the contradictions inherent to the relationship between their specifically ascribed function as agents of social discourse and their economic status as purveyors of commodified knowledge/information distinguish media from other social institutions: in a certain sense, media thrive on 'crisis' and are threatened by 'normalcy'.

The tendency is, therefore, for media to seek out crisis where it does not exist, and to obscure the actual forces of change that threaten media privilege along with entrenched social privilege in general. Paradoxically, this means that media will tend to pay even more attention to a fabricated crisis than to one that can stake a material claim to reality. For social actors, provoking a crisis thus becomes a form of empowerment or social control. But the ensuing access to media attention is unequally skewed, to the extent that the media themselves are socially positioned.

In a powerful and provocative essay first published in France in the wake of the events of May 1968, Guy Debord (1983) described modern society as one in which public life was reduced to a spectacle. Reviewing his earlier observations recently, Debord (1990) argued that the most significant social fact of the intervening 20 years was the *unbroken continuity* of the spectacle.

Debord characterizes the spectacle as 'the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign . . . The establishment of spectacular domination is such a profound social transformation that it has radically altered the art of government' (Debord, 1990: 2, 87).

Henceforth, all discussion of what the world's rulers do is organized through the spectacle, through the unilateral and uni-directional communication via the mass media of the results of decisions that have already been made. Only that which is recognized by the spectacle has historical validity; only those consecrated by the spectacle are entitled to speak with authority.

According to this view, those who consume the spectacle cannot act. The only reliable knowledge is that which one gains by direct experience. But, given the pervasiveness of media, to what extent can one participate in modern society on the basis of direct experience alone?

On Media, Crisis and Democracy

If ever a political designation has been ideologically charged, it is the term 'democracy' (cf. Raboy and Bruck, 1989). Even a cursory review of the vast array of existing and hypothetical models of democracy would be far beyond the scope of this chapter (cf. Held, 1987). But our examination of the relationship between media and crisis becomes particularly meaningful when considered in light of the evolving debate on the nature of democracy. Let us then state very briefly what democracy means to us.

In the most simple and conventional sense, a democracy is deemed to be a political system in which the majority of a given population exercises power. The obstacles encountered by systems organized along these lines have led to various critiques that highlight shortcomings such as the tendency of the majority to dominate minorities, of elites to control power

institutions in the name of the people, of the state to negotiate social peace in the interests of the elites.

We would take a different approach. We consider democracy to be a value rather than a system. As a normative concept, democracy implies equality, social justice and political mechanisms for people to participate meaningfully in making the decisions that affect their lives.

Democracy implies an ongoing struggle, in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres. If, as we have argued above, crisis is a structural feature of modern society, and media are the agents of social communication by which a crisis is made public, then the media-crisis relationship becomes a key factor in the struggle for democracy.

Challenges to the status quo in all types of society tend to be framed in terms of crisis. Crisis is a structuring concept: by labelling a situation as one of crisis, one declares the presence of a threat to the prevailing order. This declaration is usually accompanied by a political positioning with respect to the projected change.

Invoking a state of crisis has, at least in the past half-century, been the classical strategy for legitimating the silencing of media criticism, and the tendency is for media to go along. On the other hand, a serious limitation of contemporary mainstream media is their reluctance to recognize and legitimate an actually existing crisis whose logical outcome would empower those who do not currently form part of the dominant social elites.

Not all crisis is mediated, let alone media-created. Society has not yet reached a condition of stasis, and the forces of social change really do exist. The media themselves, however, constitute a contested terrain in the struggles surrounding the conceptualization, definitions, and transformation of society and democracy in different parts of the world.

As we shall see, the actual role of media with respect to the quality of democratic public life is increasingly problematic. On the one hand, it can be argued that media are most important when and insofar as the issue of democracy is at stake (cf. Keane, in this volume). On the other, one can wonder, along with Debord for example, whether media have not in fact negated the possibility of democracy.

The complicated texture of this problem was made dramatically apparent (if not quite transparent) during the major international crisis that marked the period during which this was being written: the Persian Gulf war of 1991 (see also chapters by Kellner and Masmoudi in this volume).

A Case in Point: Media and the Gulf War

Media coverage of the Gulf War must be placed in its historic context. During the single year 1989, the global mediatization of political crises reached saturation point. Live television coverage of the different manifestations of the pending collapse of the iron curtain suggested to the

viewers of the world that 'the civic function of televised information (is) precisely to go beyond appearances and reveal the real nature of a society' (Ramonet, 1991).

With the outbreak of the Persian Gulf crisis in August 1990, people expected the kind of coverage they had become accustomed to in Berlin, Beijing and Bucharest. The audience was primed. The technology was in place. But there was a major difference: information here was subject to pre-media control.

In the crises of 1989, the global media were tacitly supportive of the forces provoking the crisis. The contrary was the case in the Gulf War. Proliferation of images in one case, silence and blackout in the other. But, as Ramonet reminds us, news blackouts are not new. From the beginning of the 1980s alone, no western power allowed the media to be present during military foreign operations (Israel/Lebanon 1982; UK/Falklands 1982, US/Grenada 1983, France/Chad 1988, US/Panama 1989).¹

Even so, can we really claim that 'being there' through the eye of the camera (as in Beijing, etc) provides meaningful information, usable in the exercise of democratic citizenship? For local populations perhaps. If publics were to be informed of pending political choices, rather than after the fact, their intervention could perhaps influence those choices. As it is, we are allowed to see only that which we can no longer do more than absorb. This is consumerism in its purest form.

In the case of the Gulf War, television audiences were reduced to unabashed voyeurism. Journalists were, in the best of cases, witnesses. CNN's famous announcement of the start of the bombing of Baghdad was a virtual exercise in *non-communication* (to parody Lasswell): it could not communicate with any degree of accuracy who was bombing what, with what means and to what effect (Ramonet, 1991). Yet CNN set the standard.² Never before had an international event generated so much media coverage – and so little information, so much media criticism – and so little understanding (cf. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 1991).

Almost immediately, the role of the media became the story – in some respects even 'bigger', more controversial, than the story of the war itself, as if to say: 'We know we have little input to policy processes; but we *feel* like participants because of our consumption of media. Perhaps if we take a critical approach to media, we can feel we are helping to make policy as well.'

The speed with which media coverage of the crisis shifted from the story itself to the 'media-in-the-story' was truly stunning. The war period of 16 January to 5 March, 1991 especially, produced an outpouring of hundreds of press articles and countless audiovisual reports about the media. If the media were unable to cover the war, they made up for it by covering themselves.³

The media discourse on itself was remarkably homogeneous, in its emphasis and stressing of the following points: the denunciation of censorship, the criticism of the limitations of television as an explanatory

medium, the anxiety over the effects of spectacularization and the tendency to approach war as a kind of sporting match, and the recognition of the limitations and constraints of technologically determined journalism.

If nothing else, the Gulf War demonstrated once and for all the communicative incapacity of television and the continued importance of print media as means of reflective information. Television 'informed', in a crude sense, but gave viewers nothing to hang on to: 'Overinformation led to disinformation. The avalanche of news – often uncooked – broadcast "live and in real time" made viewers hysterical with the illusion that they were being informed . . . Being there was not enough to know what was going on' (Ramonet, 1991).

Critics concurred that the missing ingredient of the war coverage was the war itself. Coverage was of the *crisis*, in the abstract.

Management of information in wartime is 150 years old. But never before have we been able to give ourselves such an *illusion* of being informed. In this respect, television coverage of the Persian Gulf War was purely ideological in the Althusserian sense of ideology as 'a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (Althusser, 1971: 162).

A certain managerial tendency has considered serious policy questions – especially regarding war and diplomacy – to be beyond the purview of ordinary citizens, ever since Walter Lippmann published *Public Opinion* on his return from the Versailles conference of 1919 (Lippmann, 1922; see also Burnham, 1941).

A state of crisis encourages this tendency. Then, in addition to the public's declared incapacity to decide due to its lack of technical expertise, one must factor in the need for secrecy, censorship, or suppression of information in the name of national security (cf. Masmoudi in this volume). The media become not a forum for public discussion of policy issues, but a means of massaging the public with reassurances that the authorities have the crisis well in hand. Surfing on the waves of public opinion, the authorities are then able to execute all manner of political agendas, under the cover of crisis communication. But we would do well to recall that such exceptional measures are one of the basic features of totalitarianism (cf. Mattelart and Mattelart, 1979: 55).

This is precisely what happened during the Gulf War, with the preponderance of retired military analysts and other experts seconded to supplement the official information streaming from the Pentagon, the White House, and (for local purposes) other 'allied' capitals. In the face of the general ignorance and professional helplessness of the journalistic milieu, these experts became the oracles of the information we needed to know.

Former White House communication chief (under Ronald Reagan) Michael Deaver candidly explained the strategy to a reporter from *Le Nouvel Observateur* in June 1991:

The military successfully integrated a communication strategy (to its activities) . . . They understood that it was just as important, if not more, to look after the journalists as to deal with logistics or pure military strategy . . . Millions of people saw the representatives of the government speak with assurance while reducing the press to a bunch of assholes asking stupid questions. (de Rudder, 1991: 6-7)

The Gulf War not only rewrote von Clausewitz, it also gave new life to the Hollywood good-guy/bad-guy model of conflict representation (which had, as it turns out, suffered an only temporary blow with the end of the Cold War; cf. Halliday et al. in this volume). The tendency to flatten a complex and multi-textured phenomenon into simple formulations, for example by blackening Saddam Hussein and his regime, obscured all possible consideration of the real meaning of the war, of US designs and motives, of the manipulation of public opinion and disinformation (see Warren, 1991; Kellner in this volume).⁴

The tendency was thus for most people to think as they were told, prompting one critic to remark: 'This represents a historic triumph for propaganda; it no longer needs to bother suppressing or distorting inconvenient facts' (Salutin, 1991: 36).

The facts, meanwhile, were available for those who wanted them in an array of small, independent print media (including some prominent ones such as *The Village Voice* and *Le Monde Diplomatique*) and, in disjointed and decontextualized fashion, in much of the mainstream press as well.

But, significantly, the strongest criticism *in* the media was levelled *at* the media. Characterizing the press as 'a claque applauding the American generals and politicians in charge', and television as 'the most egregious official lap dog during the war', Anthony Lewis of *The New York Times* wrote that government control and censorship alone could not explain the media's performance: 'We glorified war and accepted its political premise, forsaking the independence and scepticism that justify freedom of the press' (Lewis, 1991).

Lewis Lapham, meanwhile, wrote in *Harper's Magazine* that the bulk of the war coverage 'was distinguished by its historical carelessness and its grotesque hyperbole' (1991: 12), concluding that 'a servile press is a circus act, as loudly and laughingly cheered by a military dictatorship as by a democratic republic' (Lapham, 1991: 15).

Trite as it may seem to say, the Gulf crisis drove home not the horror and insanity of war but the emptiness of mainstream media news coverage, especially television. Possibly for the first time, the extent to which media spectacle has substituted for public participation in politics received some essential comment (if not quite an extensive airing) in the media themselves.

In sharp contrast, western media coverage of the unfolding of the failed coup in the Soviet Union in August 1991 was rich and expansive. By comparison to the Gulf War, there were three important differences in the circumstances surrounding the Soviet event: first of all, Soviet authorities

were unable to control the flow of information and the media enjoyed easy direct access to oppositional forces and important arenas of action (such as the streets of Moscow). Second, western media audiences in this case did not need to be called upon to support policy decisions of their own leadership and could be unproblematically addressed strictly as spectators. Finally – and no small point as far as the media institutions were concerned – no one was going to argue with their trumpeting that the Russian Revolution was good news this time around.

Media, Crisis and Democracy: Mass Communication and the Disruption of Social Order

The Gulf War illustrated dramatically some of the ethical and political questions raised by media intervention in a context of crisis. The chapters of this book suggest that these questions are not specific to a particular situation, but are rather endemic to our era, and that they are furthermore fundamental to the continued quality of democratic public life.

Seen another way, the contributions to this international collection suggest that the relationship between media and democracy can best be understood by referring to the notion of crisis. As one of the key structuring elements of social and political life in the late twentieth century, crisis can be seen as synonymous with both modernity and progress. But situations of crisis are more revealing about society and its structures than situations of normalcy. This, the book shows, is particularly true insofar as the role of media in society is concerned.

Returning to the classical origins of liberalism that lie at the root of modern media theory, John Keane argues that the threat to the sovereignty of the nation-state that is deemed to accompany a state of crisis actually subverts the democratic foundations of the media. He proposes instead a new understanding of the relationship between democracy and information. Keane's chapter turns around the relationship between communication and civil society – a theme that characterizes much of his work (see eg Keane, 1988) – and ends with some reflection on the possibility of a truly international civil society (cf. also Bruck and Raboy, 1989).

Keane's is the first of several contributions in the book that emphasize the relationship between crisis situations and state security measures from the perspective of the relative freedom of media activity (see also Masmoudi in this volume). As crisis situations tend to mobilize for security measures, a classical strategy for legitimating clampdowns has been to invoke a state of crisis (cf. Gerbner in this volume). In this context, media become an extension of the state, ensuring 'that a latent crisis becomes manifest' (cf. Keane in this volume).

The most sophisticated argument of this type in recent decades was the mid-1970s formulation of a 'crisis of democracy', put forward by the

