Utropias in conflict: History, political discourse and advertising

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of ‘utopia’ and ‘ideology’ were key elements in political debate in the twentieth century, but seem to have disappeared from the scene in the twenty-first. After the collapse of communism, the media and intellectuals announced the demise of utopia, coinciding with the end of history and ideology. In common parlance, the use of the terms largely remains pejorative or, in academic circles, conceptually ambiguous. Despite their inherent ambiguity, this paper reflects on the role played by the concepts of utopia, hope and political imagination in the mobilisation of people. Three recent examples of advertisements are analysed in order to understand how utopian rhetoric is used and how their reception depends on their inclusion within broader cultural and political narratives.

The end of utopia?

The concepts of ‘utopia’ and ‘ideology’ were key elements in political debates in the twentieth century, but they seem to have lost their centrality in political discourse in recent decades. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, many intellectuals and the media announced the demise of utopia. The so-called end of utopia coincided with the collapse of communist regimes and ideologies (Eagleton, 1991; Jacoby, 1999). Fukuyama (1992) went even further by declaring ‘the end of history’. Inspired by Kojève’s reading of Hegel, he conceived history as a dialectical struggle between two antagonistic ideologies. With the breakdown of the USSR, liberalism no longer had a counterpart. Liberalism, for Fukuyama, was not merely the accidental winner of the ideological battle: he was also convinced that the combination of the liberal democratic system and market capitalism represented the definitive culmination of the ideological progress of humanity. With this political and economic structure now achieved, we do not need utopian visions or ideological debates to motivate collective actions towards change. This means that the historical dynamic has reached a final stage and no relevant political change can be expected after 1990. It only remains to administer resources and solve minor conflicts. Of course, history contradicted any predictions about its disappearance: we saw the emergence of the Internet, new forms of terrorism, natural disasters, economic and demographic crisis and so on. These are only a few examples of historical events that have inevitably
changed our self-understanding. Thus, historical and social change warns us to be cautious and to constantly readjust our projects, expectations, hopes, desires and forecasts.

But if history has not come to an end, what has happened to ideologies and utopias? Are they still playing a role in politics, or have they now virtually disappeared from the scene? The words ‘utopia’ and ‘ideology’ are still in use in common parlance, but their occurrence is frequently intended in pejorative ways. After the political catastrophes of the twentieth century, ‘ideology’ is often identified with political bigotry or with undercover machinations behind apparently neutral political programmes. There is a common assumption that ‘what persuades men and women to mistake each other from time to time for gods or vermin is ideology’ (Eagleton, 1991, p. xiii). We also label daydreamers as ‘utopian’, as well as any political projects that seem ‘realistically’ unfeasible. Ideologies are avoided or condemned, as is radicalism. The same has happened with utopias. As Jacoby puts it, someone ‘who believes in utopias is widely considered out to lunch or out to kill’ (Jacoby, 1999, p. xi). It is ideology’s flirting with power and utopia’s flirting with disaster that prevent us from relying on them as relevant sources of political motivation.

The conceptual history of the terms shows that their ambiguity was already present from the very beginning. The classical definition of the terms is attributed to the sociologist Karl Mannheim. He defined ‘utopia’ as a state of mind that is ‘incongruous with the state of affairs within which it occurs’ (Mannheim, 1966, p. 177). Further characteristics in Mannheim’s definition are that: (i) utopia is oriented towards an object which does not exist in the actual situation; (ii) it transcends the immediate situation and (iii) it may shatter (partially or wholly) the order of things. Ideology is assumed to have similar traits: it is a negation of the current state of affairs and has the potential to distort reality in favour of the interests of a hegemonic group. However, utopia has a distinctive goal: it tends to ‘burst the bonds of the existing order’ (Mannheim, 1966, p. 173). Mannheim’s distinction between utopia and ideology, which can sometimes be very subtle, can be summed up as follows: whereas ideologies seek to reinforce the power of dominant groups in society, utopias generally have been a means to fulfil the interests of the oppressed.

Mannheim’s approach to ideologies and utopias was part of a larger project: the study of political ideas in order to create a sociology of knowledge, one that approaches political values and beliefs in the context of tensions amongst distinct political groups. Utopias and ideologies do exist, but they exist in conflict: their frictions reflect the current interplay of forces within a given society. Bearing this in mind, Mannheim distinguishes between evaluative and non-evaluative uses of the term. This is to say that no political rationale is free of values, beliefs, hopes or desires. Eagleton (1991), who has worked on the meaning of ‘ideology’, also states that the term has various meanings and connotations. Some are evaluative, but some are cognitive and only take into account that ideologies, as social productions of ideas, can be held by different social groups (hegemonic or not). When we use the term ‘ideology’, we often want to discredit our opponents. Our reluctance to admit that our point of view might be ideological is well explained by Eagleton’s metaphor: ‘Ideology, like halitosis, is in this sense what the other person has’ (Eagleton, 1991, p. 2).

In this paper, I would like to focus on utopia and political imagination by examining the almost synchronic emergence of several advertising campaigns using utopian language, and of social movements in which the utopian element was present. This has happened
in an era that had been labelled the ‘end of utopia’ (Jacoby, 1999). Since Mannheim’s definition and typology of utopias, the concept has gone through several phases of appearance and disappearance. Mannheim himself prophesied that the advancement of industrialised society and the rationalisation of political processes would lead to the ‘elimination of reality-transcending elements of our world’ and this would mean ‘the decay of the human will’ (Mannheim, 1966, p. 222). In 1967, Herbert Marcuse, in his essay ‘The End of Utopia’, argued that the end of utopia signalled ‘the refutation of those ideas and theories that use the concept of utopia to denounce certain socio-historical possibilities’ (Marcuse, 1970, p. 62). For Marcuse, utopia, as an exercise of political imagination, is necessary to develop alternative projects of social experience. Nevertheless, he was quite pessimistic about the prospects of any alternative projects to challenge the ideology of capitalism in advanced industrial societies. In One-dimensional man (1964), he had already pointed out the slim chances of success for what he called ‘The Big Refusal’. In Marcuse’s view, ‘a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour prevents any form of protest’ within the technological society of advanced capitalism (Marcuse, 1964, p. 12). The comfortable life in affluent societies produces its own form of ideology, which inhibits any sign of reaction, since ‘ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content transcend the established universe of discourse and action, are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe’ (Marcuse, 1964, p. 12). Marcuse paid special attention to works of art, and the fact that artists who were considered marginal or subversive in their time have been integrated as merchandise in the free market. In this process, they lose their truth, that is, their rejection of the very social reality within which they are now being marketed (Marcuse, 1964, p. 58). Who cares now about Van Gogh’s painful delirium, his suffering at the margins of the ‘good’ society and the radical novelty of his expressive style? Today, posters of ‘Starry Night’ are displayed because they match the rest of our furnishings. If not, Klimt’s ‘The Kiss’, or a reproduction of Gauguin’s colourful work might fulfil particular decorative needs. More recently, Bauman has expressed a similar idea by pointing to the extraordinary capacity of consumer society to absorb any form of dissent and ‘then to recycle it, as a major resource of its own production, reinvigoration and expansion’ (Bauman, 2007, p. 48). Consumer society, for Bauman, represents the end of the political, as it did for Marcuse. Consumerism and commodification numb political consciousness by appealing to sensuality and comfort. To put it bluntly: consumerism and politics, in Marcuse’s and Bauman’s view, are mutually exclusive.

Jacoby wrote in 1999 about an ‘era of acquiescence’ in which we are ‘asked to choose between the status quo or something worse. Other alternatives do not seem to exist’ (Jacoby, 1999, p. xi). Since the fall of communism, a new consensus has emerged: that political ideas should be restricted to pragmatic solutions in order to resolve specific problems. As Jacoby puts it:

the twentieth century is not an unbroken story of a declining utopian vision. In the wake of the Russian Revolution, in the 1920s around the surrealists and again in the 1960s utopian ideas flared up – and burned out. […] Although scholarly studies of utopianism persist, across the land a utopian spirit is dead or dismissed. (Jacoby, 1999, pp. 158–159)

If capitalism has such power to gobble up any attempt at resistance, why reclaim the old-fashioned utopian discourse? It seems that, as Marcuse posed it, capitalism is ideological but also has its own utopia. In this respect, I agree with Ruth Levitas’ statement that
utopias cannot be reduced to literary fiction or political blueprints and that ‘utopianism in the sense of visualizing, hoping for, and working for a better world is an enduring and essential element of human aspiration and political culture’ (Levitas, 2010, p. xiii). This does not mean that utopian forms are always innocent. Utopias may be stimulating and positive, but they can also serve to distort and delude. There might be a path by which fostering people’s hopes and desires for a better world (a utopian vision) results in the reinforcement of the status quo and the dominant position of social groups (an ideological strategy). The conceptual proximity between utopia and ideology, and their political ambiguity, can sometimes lead to the confusion of the terms.

Surely, utopian discourse ought to be the subject of much criticism, especially because of its flirtation with ideologies, understood here as intentional distortions of reality to legitimise political domination. This inherent ambiguity of utopia and ideology may be an unavoidable problem. Nevertheless, the potential of utopian discourse to mobilise and influence human action deserves careful examination. Human agents make decisions by weighing reasons, but such reasons are not their only source of motivation. John Dewey observed, as early as 1927, in his work The Public and Its Problems, that ‘emotional habituations and intellectual habitudes on the part of the mass of men create the conditions of which exploiters of sentiment and opinion only take advantage’ (Dewey, 1984, p. 341). For Dewey, habits of thought are important since habit ‘does not preclude the use of thought, but it determines the channels within which it operates’ (Dewey, 1984, p. 335). This is not far from Bourdieu’s analysis of habitus and structures: structures function as environments that reproduce habits as abiding dispositions without the conscious participation of social agents or external conductors. Structures provide, so to speak, ‘common sense’: the meaning of individual action is given by the dialectical interplay between the individual seeking a meaningful life and the social possibilities of sense-making (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 72–80).

In his analysis of ideologies, Eagleton (1991) suggests that the concept has different levels of application: genetic (the production of ideas), epistemic (ideas and beliefs already existing in society) and political (relating to power). Levitas places desire at the heart of utopia: ‘a desire for a different, better way of being’ (Levitas, 2010, p. 209). We could interpret this from the perspective of Dewey’s assertion: political persuasion involves argumentative and non-argumentative elements. As claimed by Jasper, our rationalistic traditions of analysis have systematically ignored the non-argumentative elements of decisions (Jasper, 2011, p. 298). In particular, he sees hope and the desire to have an effect on the world as the greatest spur to action (Jasper, 2011, p. 291). Feelings, emotions, affective loyalties, connection through collective identities, rituals and routines, group dynamics, argumentation and rational persuasion, all play a crucial role in the mobilisation of social movements. In addition, Gerbaudo (2012), who has studied the social movements emerging in 2011, concludes that some form of emotional condensation precedes the physical precipitation of movements in public spaces.

To sum up, persuading political agents to assume a political project may involve an appeal to good reasons, but also the fostering of people’s desires and hopes for a better life. The appeal to reason and the fostering of hopes and desires are traits that political argumentation has in common with marketing and advertising. Again, in Levitas’ words,
Utopian images may be used for manipulative purposes. Much advertising uses images of the good life (the idyllic island, the sophisticated life of leisure and consumption, the cozy nuclear family) to sell products. Advertisements work, though, because they key into utopian images which are already present among the audience, reflecting their desires, their lack. (Levitas, 2010, p. 219)

Utopian language and images may have abandoned the public political debate, but they still constitute a means to influence people in certain ways.

The three advertisements analysed in this paper make use of utopian language and images in a time said to be too realistic for any belief in utopias (Jacoby, 1999). An unavoidable problem of the analysis is to identify the motivations that lie behind the use of these utopian images because, as we have seen, ambiguity is an intrinsic feature of utopias and ideologies. As a result, we cannot always reach unequivocal answers. In this essay, the approach to these questions is philosophical, offering a reflection on the meaning of some social phenomena that are taken here as representative of our media culture.

The analysis of the three commercials as uses of utopian rhetoric in advertising focuses on the following aspects: (a) the reconstruction of the internal narrative of the adverts; (b) the exposition of the external elements related to the setting of these narratives; (c) the contextualisation of the utopian images with a focus on the audiences they intend to reach and (d) the effect and reception of the utopian images on the audiences. These examples indicate the extent to which utopian rhetoric is incorporated in the collective imaginary. Their potential effect, however, involves a plurality of elements that transcend the internal narrative and the original objectives of the advertisers.

**Advertising and utopia: reasons to believe in a better world**

The first example is the campaign launched by Coca-Cola in 2011, entitled ‘There are reasons to believe in a better world’. The company declared that the main motivation for the campaign was to spread hope and happiness all over the world:

For every reason to fear, there is a reason to hope. For every reason to give up or give in, there is a reason to dig deep and try harder. And for every reason to doubt, there are countless reasons to believe in a better tomorrow.

That’s the message behind a topical Coca-Cola campaign that celebrates the notion that, despite ongoing economic uncertainty, political unrest, natural disasters and more, the good in today’s world far outweighs the bad. (Moye, 2012)

According to the press note issued by Coca-Cola in December 2012, the original idea emerged in Mexico and Colombia one year earlier. In the advertisement, a youth choir sings whilst images and words are projected onto the background. The reaction in Latin America was so enthusiastic that the advertisement has been adapted in more than 70 countries. For instance, the Japanese version seeks to bolster a society that was devastated by the earthquake of 2011 and the nuclear accident in Fukushima. In Egypt, the campaign was adapted for Ramadan ‘by reinforcing the greater good of humanity in a post-Arab Spring environment’. A ‘dose of happiness’ was delivered to European countries that are going through a deep economic crisis, such as Greece, Italy and Spain. Javier Sánchez Lamelas, Marketing Vice President for Latin America, explained that the idea
was to communicate to people who are going through tough times that things will get better and that ‘Coca-Cola is the brand that can provide this reassurance’ (Moye, 2012).

In the UK version, the advertisement begins with a list of reasons to believe in a better world, supposedly supported by data obtained from a scientific study in 2010 (the original source is never quoted). We see a group of children singing whilst their teacher, a young man, plays the guitar. The children in the class, all about 8–10 years old, represent the cultural and racial diversity of the country. As they sing Oasis’ ‘Whatever’, a list of reasons to believe in a better world appear in opposition to negative events and reasons to be pessimistic. Every reason, the positive and the negative, is illustrated through evocative images. Here is an extract of the reasons listed in the advertisement:

For every tank that is built in the world …
131,000 teddy bears are being made.
For each stock market that crashes …
there are 10 covers of ‘What a Wonderful World’.
For every corrupt person …
there are 8,000 blood donors.
For every wall …
there are 20,000 ‘Welcome’ mats.
While a scientist creates a new weapon …
one million mums are baking chocolate cakes.
Worldwide, more Monopoly money is printed than dollars.
There are more funny videos on the internet …
than bad news around the world.
LOVE has more results than FEAR [on Google].
For every person who says that everything will get worse …
there are 100 couples trying to have a baby.
For every weapon that is sold in the world …
20,000 people share a Coca-Cola.
There are reasons to believe in a better world. (Songsandtv1, 2011)

Despite the emotional impact achieved by the advertisement, a closer analysis of the images indicates that the contrast between the chosen illustrations is not marked so clearly. For example, the images corresponding to the market crash show a hectic trading floor, and the corrupt person is a cartoon of an executive with dollar bills exploding out of his head. Shortly afterwards, we see many red balloons filling a blue sky to illustrate the fact that 8000 people are donating blood, but it is unclear where this happens and how long it takes to reach that number of donors. The weapon created by a scientist is an enormous rocket being launched into the air. We are, therefore, not confronted with an image that shows us the deadly effects an actual weapon can achieve. The visual language used in the advertisement symbolises blood with the inclusion of red balloons, rather than more literal images of the viscous fluid leaking from a dead body. As an example of funny videos on the Internet, we see a cute baby smiling. Its negative counterpart – ‘bad news around the world’ – is illustrated with the image of a groom slipping and falling next to his bride at their wedding ceremony. This is, of course, more humorous than tragic. The last two reasons seem more symmetric in their composition, but their connotations differ greatly. We read the message ‘For every weapon that is sold in the world’ whilst we see images of a military parade. The corresponding reason to believe in a better world (‘20,000 people share a Coca-Cola’) depicts several children holding bottles of Coca-Cola, distributed spatially in a way that resembles the previous military formation, but
looking in the opposite direction, as if they were actually in dialogue, confronting one another. Overall, the juxtaposition of positive and negative reasons clearly lends more weight to the bright side of life. Needless to say, it is not possible to fight a tank by sharing a Coca-Cola.

Of course, we could argue that the meanings that are assigned to these reasons are, in fact, subjective, and the ways in which we value different elements depend on personal opinions and experiences. The presumed reasons for believing in the campaign are not based upon quantitative facts, but upon the existence of human emotions and dispositions that have positive qualities. The use of utopian discourse calls for the audience-consumers to remain hopeful amid uncertainty, and to hold on to the notion that good will, in the end, triumph over evil. This is a positive interpretation of the campaign. Another, less positive interpretation is that it uses utopian references without aiming to achieve a radical transformation of negative circumstances. Moreover, it suggests that everything will improve if we remain faithful to commercial values.

Advertising, utopia and history: from ironic play to commemoration

The critically acclaimed film Good Bye, Lenin! (2003) by Wolfgang Becker contains a very powerful scene in which the young Alexander Kremer is desperately trying to persuade his sick mother that everything outside her room is as it has always been in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Precisely in this instant, an unmistakable sign that everything has, in fact, changed forever appears behind Alex’s back: a large Coca-Cola banner is being unfurled in one of the highest buildings in Alexanderplatz in Berlin. It is interesting to observe that if there is a brand that we, in our imaginary, identify with capitalism, that brand is Coca-Cola, bringing refreshment and ‘happiness’ to the world for 127 years.

In the Eberswalderstraße, at least until 2008, souvenirs could be bought in a shop called ‘East Berlin’. The shop’s sign was rather revealing: the typography paid clear homage to Coca-Cola. Berliners, who are well known for their keen sense of irony, are used to this type of aesthetic play. The souvenir shop represented a widespread phenomenon in former Communist countries, especially in the former GDR. On the day after the wall fell, chunks of it were already being sold as gifts. What happened was exactly what Marcuse foresaw: in a one-dimensional world, the hegemonic ideology incorporates its antagonist as part of its own discourse. In this case, the past antagonist becomes a lucrative investment for the future. Another example of the exchange value of the past can be seen in the Louis Vuitton advertisement of 2007, which showed Mikhail Gorbachev, with a classic Vuitton bag on the seat beside him, in a car driving by the Berlin Wall. Other celebrities who were photographed by Annie Leibovitz for the campaign were Steffi Graf, Andre Agassi and Catherine Deneuve (NBC, 2007). The advertisement has an ironic effect if we bear in mind that Gorbachev was the last leader of the Soviet Union, a political project that collapsed shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall. Some critics have gone further in their analysis of the photograph and noticed that, inside the open bag, there is a journal with a headline in Cyrillic: ‘The Murder of Litvinenko: They Wanted to Give Up the Suspect for $7,000’. Dan Levin explained this reference in an article written for the New York Times in 2007.
The reference is to Alexander V. Litvinenko, the former K.G.B. spy who died last November after being poisoned with a radioactive isotope, polonium 210. On his deathbed, Mr. Litvinenko accused President Vladimir V. Putin of orchestrating his murder; the British authorities have accused one of Mr. Litvinenko’s associates, Andrei K. Lugovoi, of the crime, and have requested his extradition from Russia, which the Kremlin has refused. (Levin, 2007)

As the translation of the headline circulated online, Pietro Beccari, director of marketing at Ogilvy & Mather (Louis Vuitton’s agency), denied any attempts to deliver a subliminal political message, since the intention of the portraits was to reflect on ‘personal journeys’. The presence of the journal is said to be merely ‘coincidental’ and ‘serendipitous’, and Gorbachev has claimed that he was unaware of its presence in the bag beside him (Levin, 2007).

Germany’s reunification has been one of the most important milestones in recent history, following a number of very complex processes taking place all across the GDR, especially in Leipzig, where the peaceful Montagdemos marched from the Nikolaikirche around the Runde Ecke to the Dittrichring (where the Stasi district headquarters stood), with more than 100,000 people walking behind a banner declaring Wir sind das Volk (‘We are the people’).

The people of Leipzig are still proud of the fact that their city was one of the main settings of the Friedliche Revolution, that is, the peaceful revolution that led to Germany’s reunification. The Deutsche Telekom advertisement of 2009, which was shot on 8 November, one day before the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, reflects the sentiment (Mark, 2011). We see an ordinary rush hour on a seemingly ordinary day in the Central Railway Station in Leipzig. Suddenly, a man sings ‘Guten Tag! Hallo!’ (‘Good morning! Hello!’) from the top of the stairs. ‘Hallo!’, repeats the man. ‘Hallo!’, answers a crowd of 1000 Leipzigers. ‘Freude!’ (‘Joy!’), adds the man introducing the tune. ‘Freude!’, replies the crowd exuberantly. Then, together, they start to sing: ‘Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Töchter aus Elisium. Wir betreten feuertunken, himmlische, dein Heiligtum’. At this point, opera singer Paul Potts joins the man on the stairs and sings the same verse. Then, the Leipzigers, the first man and Paul Potts sing the entire anthem, ‘An die Freude’ (‘Ode to Joy’).

The choice of the musical piece is no accident. The text was written by Friedrich Schiller near the railway station in Leipzig-Gohlis, a district in the north of Leipzig. The music comes from Ludwig van Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. This piece has become the anthem of the European Union and it symbolises the union of the people in peaceful, harmonious coexistence. The advertisement ends with the line ‘Grenzen gabs gestern’ (‘Limits belong to the past’), in colloquial German. This is, in fact, a play on words, since Grenzen means both ‘borders’ and ‘limits’. People living in the GDR used to refer to the wall as ‘die Grenze’ (‘the border’). Thus, the sentence selected by Deutsche Telekom has two clear references: ‘borders belong to the past’ (a reference to the historical past, and the wall that divided the two Germanies) and ‘limits belong to the past’ (a reference to the present in terms of communication technologies, as the company trades in this industry and was offering the possibility to unify its diverse products and services in one single contract).
usually expect to see in an advertisement (to convince us of the advantages of buying a certain product). From one perspective, it can be interpreted as a genuine and touching commemoration of the civil courage that brought Germany to reunification. In this respect, the advertisement promises to preserve this spirit of peaceful coexistence. From another viewpoint, it shows – intentionally, I would argue – a picture of civil society in Leipzig that differs greatly from the one that existed at the time of the ‘Wende’ (the Germans’ term to refer to the process of reunification). By doing this, the advertisement not only promotes a communications platform and commemorates the past, but also publicises the city of Leipzig. It shows a city bound up with past demands for democracy (represented by the elderly generation) and also a city open to future generations and newcomers (represented by young families, and by students from Leipzig and abroad). It is also a city where – according to the advertisement – everyone is ready to sing, jubilantly and spontaneously, the ‘Ode to Joy’ on demand.

Furthermore, the advertisement establishes a connection between the lack of limits in communication and the disappearance of the political boundaries that divided Germany into two nations in conflict. This may suggest different readings: for instance, that the people’s will to be united can be stronger than any political ideology. It may also imply that the existence of better communication networks can be a powerful counterweight to artificial political antagonisms. In this respect, it is interesting to recall how the peaceful revolution, which was borne largely by the GDR population, took place. It began with small meetings inside the Nikolaikirche and, when the GDR authorities did not suppress these gatherings, the spark spread across the GDR and the longing for democracy became impossible to extinguish. It might have been the intention of the Telekom campaign to suggest that a united and well-connected civil society will be stronger against the ghosts of division. The motto of the campaign was ‘Erleben, was verbindet’ (‘Living, what keeps us together’). In fact, Deutsche Telekom announced that all SMS sent on 9 November 2009 would be free of charge.5

**Advertising a new utopia?**

The Deutsche Telekom example provides a clear illustration of the ways in which a private company may appropriate the historical past for its own purposes. However, the advertisement was very successful in Germany, and there has been no criticism of the company taking advantage of the historical legacy of a reunited Germany. Not only were the reactions positive and emotional, but the commercial also won an Effie, the most important marketing award in Germany (Deutsche Telekom, 2009).

This outcome is very different from the one achieved by Movistar’s (a subsidiary of Telefónica) advertising campaign in Spain in November 2011. In the preceding months, Spain had experienced the occupation of public spaces in several cities across the country, starting in Madrid on 15 May. These waves of social protest, which came to be known as ‘15M’ or ‘indignados’ (outraged), resulted in the occupation of streets and squares for weeks, with the protesters representing a broad cross-section of Spanish society: students, the unemployed, retirees, activists and the apolitical, the young and the old (Castells, 2012, p. 115). The popular outburst did not seem to follow a definite ideology or programme (Antentas & Vivas, 2012; Castells, 2012; Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014). What all the protesters had in common, however, were two fundamental convictions: (1) there is no hope for
citizens in the current crisis of capitalism and (2) our duty as citizens is to reclaim the original meaning of ‘democracy’. ‘Shame on this democracy!’ was one of the cries that could be heard in the streets. The *indignados* denounced the fact that banks and corporations are the ones making key decisions, whilst ordinary citizens foot the bill and struggle on, bearing the consequences of their irresponsibility. They claimed that democracy had to be taken away from the hands of the politicians and bankers in order to give it back to those to whom it really belongs: the people.6

The political content of the movement was therefore twofold. On the one hand, the movement began amongst the hopeless, the desperate, those whose expectations had been systematically frustrated. They did not have any concrete plans for the future: their claim was that the situation was too severe and it could not be allowed to become worse. The popular reaction, however, was so powerful that a collective form of hope suddenly emerged. Extemporaneous communities arose as people devoted their entire days to a new occupation: joining an exciting, genuine debate on the essence of democracy. In this sense, outrage constituted a new hope, a real feeling of ‘togetherness’ (Antentas & Vivas, 2012; Castells, 2012).

Castells (2012) suggests that the 15M movement was, indeed, a ‘rhizomatic revolution’. Its distinctive feature, and perhaps one of the keys to its rapid success, was its appeal to a majority of the Spanish population. The movement was said to be horizontal, non-ideological, spontaneous and lacking conscious organisation or political leadership. Gerbaudo, however, has argued that it was not particularly spontaneous, since the campaign launched by *Democracia Real Ya* ‘was supported by thousands of Internet users and also by 200 civil society organizations’ (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 87). As the movement progressed from a Facebook page to Puerta del Sol in Madrid, its impact expanded quickly to 57 Spanish cities. Local assemblies and communication networks were created (Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014). It became possible to know what was happening elsewhere in the country and to coordinate joint actions thanks to the use of social media (Gerbaudo, 2012). Thousands of videos in YouTube advertised the movement and invited people from Spain and abroad to join.7

During the rise of the 15M movement, a feeling close to hope took hold as people noticed that it was possible to engage in a profound debate on Spain’s economic and institutional crisis. It was an experiment in what real, direct democracy could look like. It is difficult to describe the emotions that resulted from 15M, and the ones that remained in the ensuing months and years. This might be why the advertising campaign of Movistar during the 2011 Christmas period, a few months after this high-spirited moment, caused such uproar.

The advertisement shows a sort of local assembly, emulating the ones that people had joined from 15M. The participants of this assembly discuss the best rates for potential clients of the mobile operator:

Man 1 (in his thirties):
Woman 1 (same age, Latin-American accent):
Man 2 (about 60 years old, maybe a retiree, sarcastically):
Woman 2 (in her thirties):

Let’s talk one after the other, OK?
I would ask them not to charge for text messages that give good news … for instance, to wish someone a happy birthday, or when someone gets married …
That is not always good news … [people laugh]
How are they supposed to know whether the news is good or bad?

Woman 3 (about 70 years old): Nowadays, cell phones are so sophisticated that they can even tell your blood-sugar level! [people laugh]

Man 3 (about 40, in suit): I think it is just the opposite … it is better not to pay for something bad … if you have a cold and you can’t go to work …

Man 4 (teenager): And that is bad news? [people laugh]

Man 1: Why not ask them for all text messages to be free?

Man 2: That won’t happen …

Man 1: We can ask, we have nothing to lose … OK, who votes for this?

(Everyone raises their hands)

In off: The people have spoken, and this is what they asked from us. New flat rates for cell phones, agreed by all. Text messaging free. Pay less if you use DSL. Movistar: Life is so much more when we share it. (Solospots, 2011)

The advertisement caused indignation and was accused of being a vulgar parody of 15M. Telefónica argued that it was originally thought of as homage to 15M, and did not expect to offend people’s sensibilities. In fact, many voices interpreted the company’s campaign as an effort to discredit the movement from an ideological perspective. Others saw the advertisement as a crude attempt to profit from the image of 15M (Eco-Diario, 2011). Almost immediately, 15M protesters created a new version of the video, changing the dialogue to criticise Movistar. The advertisement concludes by pointing out that ‘the people have spoken and this is what they said about Movistar’: (1) profit record: €10,167 million in 2010; (2) redundancy record: 6000 (20% of its staff) and (3) quality record: the slowest and most expensive connection in Europe (Implicatoeorg, 2011). The criticism in several Internet platforms was so intense that Luis Miguel Gil-pérez, director of Movistar Spain, admitted that the entire campaign had been a mistake and apologised for offending so many people (Pascual, 2011). FACUA (a consumer watchdog in Spain) described the advertisement as the worst one to appear in 2011 (FACUA, 2012).

Closing remarks: utopia in the internet age

‘They don’t represent us’ was one of the main slogans of the 15M movement. According to Castells, the Spanish Revolution ‘positioned itself against intermediaries, be they political, media or cultural’ (Castells, 2012, p. 121). Gerbaudo has critiqued Castell’s thesis by paying attention to the influence of social media in the orchestration of what he calls the ‘choreography of assembly’. The metaphor of choreography stands for ‘liquid organization’ and ‘soft leadership’. In 2011, the ‘year of the protesters’, the revolutions used the tools offered by social media to spread the word and facilitate instant communication. Gerbaudo adds nuance to the self-description of the movements by focusing on the unavoidable mediation of immediacy: ‘immediacy (by definition the absence of mediation) cannot be sustained without being thoroughly mediated’ (2012, p. 163).

The claim of horizontality and decentralisation, and the use of social media, characterise the social movements of the twenty-first century, particularly those that have taken place
since 2011. They experimented with new forms of radical democracy, as opposed to the hierarchical character of ‘old politics’. As Castells sees it, they were living their own utopia:

> a new utopia of networked democracy based on local communities and virtual communities in interaction. But utopias are not mere fantasy. Most modern political ideologies at the roots of political systems (liberalism, socialism, communism) originated from utopias. Because utopias become a material force by becoming incarnate in people’s minds, by inspiring their dreams, by guiding their actions and prompting their reactions. What these networked social movements are proposing in their practice is a new utopia at the heart of the culture of the network society: the utopia of the autonomy of the subject vis-à-vis the institutions of society. (Castells, 2012, p. 228)

Bearing in mind that the Internet is part of the new utopia, it is remarkable that two of the examples analysed here correspond to large telecom operators that have millions of users. But is Castells correct in stating that ‘the role of the Internet goes beyond instrumentality’ (Castells, 2012, p. 229)? These companies, if not political agents themselves, have contributed, from a technical perspective, to the success of the movement. Even though they are part of the economic system against which the protesters are reacting, these organisations facilitate the movement by supplying essential telecom services. Protesters also find themselves in a dilemma. They need communication platforms to spread their message and to organise the logistics of protest. However, to do so, they need to use the services of capitalist companies whose recruitment policies are an intrinsic part of the very problem they are denouncing. The citizen-consumer is therefore left to reflect on the meaning of their political projects, but also on the – sometimes contradictory – means for their realisation.

Through the examples presented here, we observe the complexities involved in the survival of utopias, their reception by civil society and the ambiguities involved in these processes. In the case of the Coca-Cola advertisement, despite the good intentions declared during the campaign, the use of utopian language is intended not to mobilise people, but to hint that a better world depends on the correct weighting of positive and negative factors. The example of Deutsche Telekom illustrates the overall consensus that the peaceful revolution of 1989 has brought about a better state of affairs in Germany. Of course, Germany’s reunification was not frictionless and, 25 years later, not all conflicts have been resolved. However, the motto ‘Grenzen gabs gestern’ found a breeding ground in a society that has fought to overcome political division. For this reason, the interplay between commemoration and prospects for the future that is contained in the motto was received enthusiastically. The last example, from Movistar, reflects a social reality nourished by structural ambivalences. It was a revolution of hopelessness: an absence of hope turned into indignation. Indignation ignited collective action, and collective action bred hope for the development of a truer democracy. Large corporations, banks and the central government were deemed responsible for the crisis to similar extents. Despite the use of social media to ‘choreograph’ the revolution, the Spanish people were not ready to forget the problems caused by Telefónica and its recruitment policies, which continue to fuel indignation to the present day. This explains why Spaniards, particularly the ones who had participated in 15M, were offended by the ‘appropriation’ of their protest for commercial purposes.

Persuasion, the use of utopian images and the visions of a better future all have the potential to mobilise non-trivial human action. This may be why social groups and political
agents of all sorts continue producing utopias that function as two-way mirrors: one side reflects what is wrong with the current state of affairs, whilst the other casts a ray of hope that illuminates a better situation that transcends the current one. What we may not recognise immediately are the intentions of those holding the mirror. Therefore, it is necessary to examine them closely and regularly.

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Notes

1. Levitas identifies five different meanings of ‘utopia’ in Marcuse’s work (Levitas, 2010, p. 173). I refer primarily to the use of the term in Marcuse’s ‘The End of Utopia’.

2. ‘To study ideology’, writes John B. Thompson, ‘is to study the ways in which meaning (or significane) serves to sustain relations of domination’ (quoted by Eagleton, 1991, p. 5). This is probably the single most widely accepted definition of ideology. The process of legitimation involves, at least, six different strategies. A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; naturalising and universalising such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself. ‘Such “mystification”, as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions’ (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 5–6).

3. As I write this paper, some racist organisations, such as Pegida, Legida or Bärgida, are subjecting the meaning of the Montagsdemo to revisionism in the major towns of the former GDR: Leipzig, Dresden and Berlin. This is also indicative of the fact that once political projects (such as civil courage and calls for greater democracy) have become part of a society’s imaginary, they can be updated in ways that break with their historical past, to the extent that they may even betray their original spirit.

4. Schiller wrote the poem in 1785 for his friend C.G. Körner. The poem was intended for a plaque in a Masonic lodge in Dresden. The idea of brotherhood interpreted in that context is therefore different from the meaning that we associate with the poem today.

5. Deutsche Telekom, which has its origins in the state-owned Deutsche Bundespost (the German Federal Postal Service), also ran the telephone network in West Germany, from 1947. In the GDR, the telephone service was part of the Post Office Ministry. After reunification, in 1990, the Deutsche Bundespost was divided into three companies (Postbank, Postdienst and Deutsche Bundespost Telekom), all of which remained controlled by the state. In fact, Deutsche Telekom only came into existence in 1996, after the privatisation of Deutsche Bundespost Telekom. In 2005 and 2006, Deutsche Telekom intended to fire more than 50,000 employees because of a deep financial crisis, although the conflict has been resolved. Today Deutsche Telekom is present in 50 countries and has more than 140 million clients.

6. In the months prior to 15M, a general climate of outrage had begun to emerge due to the indignation against politicians who cared only about themselves, and against bankers who had wrecked the economy with their speculative manoeuvres, only to be bailed out, and to receive handsome bonuses, while citizens suffered early from the consequences of the crisis in their jobs, salaries, services and foreclosed mortgages. (Castells, 2012, p. 114)

7. See, for instance, the video ‘#SpanishRevolution’ calling for the Spanish people to awaken and join the movement, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSS7J3lhRWA
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