

Latin American Communication Thought and the challenges for the XXI Century: Theoretical points for a collective and critical new research agenda

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Abstract

This article aims to offer a theoretical contribution to the dialogue promoted by the Latin American Communication Research Association (ALAIC) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), that are developing an important set of actions in order to involve intellectuals in different parts of the world to improve critical thought in the international Communication field.¹ Surpassing the lacks and divisions in human knowledge, caused by a variety of institutional and epistemological reasons related to the Western mainstream hegemony, is the main objective of the ALAIC-ECREA task force, as it engages in an international dialogue with macro-regional associations within the field.²

¹ The collaboration begun in 2011, in Istanbul, with a roundtable on the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) Conference, and continued in other conferences of IAMCR (Durban, 2012), ECREA (Istanbul, 2012) and ALAIC (Montevideo, 2012). ALAIC traditionally participates in IAMCR, and in all the initiatives related to the Pan American and Iberian American dialogue. It participated actively in the creation of the Iberian American of Communication Associations Confederation (CONFIBERCOM) and organized a special roundtable in the Iberian American Communication Research Association (IBERCOM) Conference, in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in 2013, inviting the North European Association of Communication Research (NORDICOM), which also participated in the ALAIC Montevideo Conference, in 2012. The roundtable in Santiago was hosted by the Galician association (AGACOM), and included representatives of the Spanish association (AE-IC), and IAMCR.

² In June 2013, I participated in four international initiatives: The ALAIC seminar, where the organization presented itself – for the first time in 36 years – in an International Communication Association (ICA) conference, which took place in London, in a pre-conference about the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), in a very important post-conference with Latin American scholars, and in the ALAIC-ECREA roundtable, in Dublin, where we invited the host association (IAMCR), the NORDICOM, the Asian association (AMIC) and the Chinese Association of Communication (CAC). The objectives were to begin a discussion of a common agenda among macro-regional research associations, ‘recognizing that regional diversity is a significant asset to our field, but at the same time drawing attention to the importance of avoiding counterproductive process of intellectual isolationism’, as it was formulated in the presentation of the meeting. On the other hand, it is important to stress that the international activism of ALAIC is combined with a more profound internal activism, exemplified by the dialogue with all Latin American national associations, the coordination of regional meetings on the subcontinent and many other initiatives, aiming to construct a broad space of intellectual exchange in the area. Also dialogues with other Latin American associations, like the one of Social Sciences (ALAS) or Political Economy (SEPLA) have been activated. The final objective is to develop a Latin American critical thought and to retake its historical international relevance in the field. To push internal forces ahead, the improvement of the academic

By defending ‘creative dialogues and exchanges’ in order to avoid unacceptable hierarchies, ALAIC and ECREA claim to contribute to this objective ‘by emphasizing the regional specificity and contextual embeddedness of theories, methodologies and research traditions’ and – referring to previous bilateral initiatives – by ‘critically comparing the strengths and weaknesses, the abundance and gaps, and then articulating these differences as opportunities for the intellectual enrichment of both academic communities’. The constitution, in Dublin 2013, of a regional organization task force, involving ALAIC, ECREA, NORDICOM, AMIC, CAC, in the context of IAMCR (see note 2) intends to extend this goal to the global level.³

The fundamental challenge, in my point of view, is to produce a certain consensus among a group of intellectuals – representative of the different geographical and epistemological areas – based on the recognition of critical thought as a common perspective, that is very important to, but not exclusive of Latin American academy. The objective of this text is to present some theoretical elements, that can help to build a common platform for action in order to rethink the relationship between communication and development, in an era of profound and worldwide changes in the power relations and hegemonies.

What is the role of communication and, in particular, the responsibility of the Communication field during the ongoing changes in the field of science, and in intellectual work in general? Is it possible to think the institutionalization of the field at the global level, appreciating the role of research associations in shaping the political and economic agenda? These questions emphasize the need to propose a large research program that challenges all common sense in the international field. It is not for me to decide here on the main elements of this program - it must be constructed collectively - but I would like to suggest the urgent need to (re)consider the - what I deem to be - central category of communication sciences: the mediation.

Firstly, I would like to summarize some ideas, more extensively developed in other texts, about the fundamental changes in the capitalist economy and society, situated in the transition from the XX to the XXI Century, which also include the intense changes in the communication sectors. Secondly, I will return to the academic

debate in the region is an essential condition for promoting an extended intellectual creativity that merits us our place in the international arena.

³ Some meetings (the roundtables at the conferences of IAMCR/Hyderabad, in July, ALAIC/Lima in August, ECREA/Lisbon, in November) and a special number of the *Journal of Latin American Communication Research* are planned for 2014, and other actions are in development.

field of Communication, in order to distinguish the Latin American Political Economy of Communication and Culture (EPC) from other Latin American paradigms and, on the other hand, from other international Political Economy perspectives. It is just an example to emphasize the need to consider the different cultural perspectives, historically determined, in the global collective intellectual dialogue in which we are involved. I will finish with the theme of mediation, from the perspective of the development of a new international research program. Of course, we should keep in mind that Latin American thought organized important discussions on these themes, but I am precisely trying to discuss, in different papers, the limits of this approach and to present an alternative related to the tradition of Brazilian PEC.

Capitalist global changes and communications: a very brief overview

Changes in capitalism, that interests us here, began with the structural crisis in the 1970's. A good synthetic definition of the changes in the productive system is the idea of the Third Industrial Revolution. The problem is how to define it. I did it by adopting Marx's definition of an Industrial Revolution, as a matter of the subsumption of work in capital, which involves technological developments. However, it is far from being restricted to it. The essential point for us is that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and more specially, the strengthening of software as a concept and a reality, promotes a broad subsumption of intellectual work (at all levels) and a general intellectualization of all labor process and consumption (Bolaño, 1995).

All social relations must be adapted to this dramatic change. An important consequence, for all economic sectors related to what we can name the 'knowledge economy', is that the brutal contradiction between the socialization of productive forces and the private appropriation – due to a complex value quantification problem – essentially modifies the character of the system, rendering it rentist and speculative in a much more profound sense than it was during the hegemony of finance capital in the XX century (Bolaño, 2002).

This hegemony now invades the inner production system, and the whole economy is organized as an economy of rights. The impact on the social structure could be understood by mixing Foucault's concepts of vigilance and control, and Marx's general intellect. In all cases, it is important to take into account that the

question of rights – as well as the technologies that are at the basis of the changes – also brings emancipatory possibilities, related to the ever-contradictory logic of capitalist development. For us, the most important point is that the capitalist mode of production is, in its essence, more and more informational and communicative. Communication assumes a central role in the productive system and in all dimensions of life, which makes it a central locus for class struggle. Two consequences are important for our discussion:

1. The complete reorganization of the old mass communication system and the structure of the public sphere. Internet may be the more expressive example. Its constitution - due to economic, political, hegemonic, military determinations - involves real changes that activate ancient contradictions in new ways.

2. Communication science is brought into question. The historical link of the discipline, in its genesis, to the USA's global hegemony is well-known. It is clear, too, that there always has been a confrontation between orthodox and critical thought. The Latin American perspective (not only in communication) is massively situated in the critical pole.

Another important change related to the international balance of political and economic power must be considered. The old post-war system disappeared in the new conditions that were emphasized before. The present reinforcement of the USA's military hegemony represents, to a large extent, a reaction to the consequences of the changes, including the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The USA's economic hegemony started to be put seriously in question in the 1970's, even when the neoliberal changes supported it, but History did not finish. The rise of China as a serious economic competitor represents an effective challenge to the USA hegemony.⁴

Every country, all over the world, is repositioned because of the China factor. It seems to be the final process of the extension of the capitalist mode of production that ends up encompassing every single part of the world. What kind of capitalism is being constructed in this precise moment is a matter of discussion. The structural contradiction involved can be expressed by the shock between the interests related to the mutual economic dependency between China and the US and, on the other hand, the Chinese strategies to construct coalitions like the BRICS, the BIICS, T-BRICS

⁴ On the other hand, even the economic limits of the USA's impressive global military apparatus were already evident at the end of Bush's administration.

and so on. It is an interesting case of category construction, both in mind and in the real world.

Some words on Political Economy and the Communication field

The complete academic communication field is called not only to explain what is happening, but also to cooperate with the other social sciences to understand the problem in its totality. International dialogue, South-South specially, is fundamental. Latin American critical thought is crucial to this debate because it represents, among other things, an alternative West, an Indigenous, African, European, even Eastern and Middle Eastern West. The Latin American perspective is democratic, essentially counter-hegemonic, more than multi-cultural, mixed and inclusive.

The Latin American tradition in communication science includes two important and very known perspectives: the old Cultural Imperialism, or Cultural Dependency paradigm, and the Latin American Cultural Studies. A third perspective begins to be more widely disseminated now. Since the 1980s, it has been developed as an internal critique of the first and in a (sometimes tense) dialogue with the second: The Latin American Political Economy of Communication and Culture (EPC), that sometimes includes the political economy of information, telecommunications, knowledge, depending on the author, the text, or the specific research particularities.

It is important to keep in mind that Latin American or even, to be more strict, Brazilian EPC is quite different from similar Anglo-American or European approaches because of its particular genesis and intellectual influences. I will just give three examples, in order to illustrate the point:

1. The problem of creativity and the creative industries, that we are discussing in Brazil, adopts a very different approach than that of the European political economy by the incorporation of Celso Furtado's concept of culture and his discussions about dependency and creativity in the diffusion of industrial civilization, especially (but not only) in his works from the 1970s. The European PEC organized a very good critique of the concept of creative economy, as it was developed, for example, by Tony Blairs' New Labor in Great Britain. I agree, of course, with these criticisms, but I want to insist that creativity is a disputed concept. In this sense, it is not useful to remain stuck in a semantic discussion because the structural changes (to which I referred above) expand, in fact, the intellectual, cognitive, creative elements of work to every economic sector (Bolaño, 2012).

2. The political economy of the Internet, which I am studying in the Federal University of Sergipe's Economy and Communication Observatory (OBSCOM). I produced recently a modest paper where I stress the differences between my own perspective and that of Christian Fuchs, directly influenced by Dallas Smythe⁵, recognized as the founder of Anglo American approach in the area (Bolaño and Vieira, 2014). The central question is related to the incredible mistake of defining, in imagined Marxist terms, audience activities as productive labor (in watching TV, in the case of Dallas Smythe, or in navigating the web, in Fuchs's perspective).

3. The Anglo American and European authors' preoccupation in redefining cultural imperialism, in Schiller's conceptualization (Sparks, 2012; Fuchs, 2010), which it is irrelevant in Latin America today. The related concept of cultural dependency, on the contrary, is still very important. From the same Furtado, and all the members of the Latin American Historic-Structuralism school, to the theorists of Cultural Dependency, passing by Dependency Theories, and later, in Communication, the critics from the Cultural Studies and from the Political Economy perspectives, the concept has had a long and complex history on the continent, and its development has not ended (Bolaño, 2012).

The only authors that participated in this long history, referred to by, for example, Sparks or Fuchs, are Mattelart (with a book published in English) and Gunder Frank. This is not the fault of Sparks, or Fuchs, or any other Anglo American or European author. I am not questioning their contributions. Sparks' (2012) article, for instance, presents a schematic summary of the Anglophonic discussions about the cultural imperialism concept, which can be useful. It has an interesting analysis of the contemporary international cultural competition. And Fuchs (2010) revisits Lenin's concept of imperialism, in parallel to a discussion on the organization of the information sector today, and he is presenting interesting data. However, the Latin American debate is much richer.⁶

I want to risk saying that the Latin American approach is more complete (and more general) because, in the case of historic-structuralism (that has no relation to French structuralism) because it is able to consider both, development and

⁵ I discussed Dallas Smythe's most known work by a theoretical approach and systematically (Bolaño, 2000).

⁶ I strongly recommend Furtado's books from the 1970's, specially the very well-known *Dependência e criatividade na civilização industrial* (Furtado, 1978). It is a pity that it was not taken into account by the Communication field until recent years, even in Latin America. The present recuperation of his culture concept in Brazil, however, is a very optimistic tendency.

underdevelopment, as two related tendencies of the same problematic cultural diffusion process. On the other hand, Latin American scholars developed the well-known concept of mediation that is at the core of the communication field, at least in my point of view. But I define it in a different way.

My emphasis, to summarize my position, is on the limitations of the more traditional approach that is devoted to the analysis of reception but neglect creative work in order to show the capacity of the resistance of the audience. I do not want to question the audience's interpretative capacities, but I do want to point to the risk of bypassing the problem of class contradictions, which leads to exaggerating the audience's autonomy in the reception process.

I proposed a more general perspective on the problem of capitalism and communication, based on the recognition of a double contradiction in the essence of capitalism (labor-capital/economy-culture) that began with the fundamental accumulation of primitive knowledge during the origins of the capitalist mode of production and the origins of the cultural industry. On the other hand, mediation is a matter of social regulation that assumes, in monopolist capitalism, the form of a set of contradictory functions that the cultural industry must accomplish: propaganda, publicity, but also certain needs related to the symbolic reproduction of the *Lebenswelt*. This general perspective is able to incorporate the contributions of both Latin American critical approaches (Political Economy and Cultural Studies), at a very high level of abstraction (Bolaño, 2000).

It is even possible to construct analytical models for articulating the work of interdisciplinary collectives in a common framework. Each participant would, of course, bring specialized methodologies to study concrete problems and to propose solutions. Many different skills are required. In epistemological terms, the problem is not to reject simply the mainstream paradigm, which not only has a negative function (ideology), but also a positive one (manipulating). Both are effective, and they legitimate communication science (and its skills) through capital and the state. In the bourgeois consciousness, communication can be only propaganda or publicity and social control. What is needed is its immanent critique, that is, both the ideology critique and the critique of the capitalist society in its concrete manifestations, revealing its contradictions.

At the level of theory construction, the problem is to understand how the contradictions of capitalist society nowadays present themselves in new concrete

ways, organizing the communication systems. How is labor subsumed in the different cultural and creative industries? How can contra-hegemonic interests act in these new social and communicational contexts? A complete theory – articulated at macro and micro levels – is required to answer these questions. The capitalist mode of production is changing in its foundations, and information and communication are fundamental in these changes. Internet, ICT, etc. are responsible for a large colonization of the *Lebenswelt* (creating a control society), but also for the changes in the organization and actions of the social movements. No relativist approach is acceptable when what we need is to understand the real contradictions of the system, when real technological possibilities are masked by technological fetishism.

At the analytical level, the problem is to define flexible analytical models, in order to facilitate cooperation among the different researchers involved in specific projects related to specific social/communicational problems. It is an intermediate level that guarantees the wider dialogue, including methodological and empirical questions, and political solutions, for example, related to cultural policy, social policy, popular culture and hegemony, etc. It is clear that, in a vast research program, involving all the critical perspectives from the field, no consensus is possible at the methodological level, but mutual comprehension remains crucial.

The main challenge, not just for Latin American, but for all critical thought in communication science, is to reclaim leadership in the international field, on the basis of its historical contributions, facing a new social, political, economic, communicational context. The Latin American social reality is rich in culture and in contradictions that can excite our sociological imagination. Cognitive creativity and innovations in mental tools are fundamental. Collaborative working and international dialogue are just as important.

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