

Preparing the political economy of communication and culture for the twenty-first century

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Abstract

Gathering texts by authors from different trends in political economy of communication and culture (PECC), this collection of articles presents a set of reflections on the discipline's state of art. Addressing issues such as the concept of "creative industries" and the theoretical and methodological dialogue between political economy and cultural studies, the book seeks to prepare a renewed political-technological agenda that takes into account the new challenges for the production, distribution and consumption of information and cultural goods in contemporary capitalism. In sum, it can be claimed that this work aims to projecting the PECC in the 21th century.

Key words: political economy; communication and culture; theoretical and methodological review; culture industries in the 21th century.

The discipline which has been called the political economy of communication and culture (PECC) presents an interesting paradox. On the one hand, its critical stance in relation to the organization of the communication and the arts markets highlights it among other trends in the communication studies. On the other, it is a field highly fragmented among authors, subjects, methodologies and theoretical approaches. It is often difficult to recognize as it is structured. Therefore, there is a constant concern in systematizing this scattered production through works that map recurring themes and bringing together key authors. There is no question that Vincent Mosco's book ([1996] 2009) is still the most complete inventory of the field. But there are also compilations of articles that can give readers a good perspective of the discipline, as the journal edited by Ana Segovia (2006), in Spain, or the books edited by Denis de Moraes (2003, 2006), César Siqueiro Bolaño (2008; Bolaño & Brittos, 2010), Valério Brittos (Brittos, 2011; Haussen & Brittos, 2009) in Brazil, as well as by Guillermo Mastrini in Argentina (Mastrini, Bolaño & Sierra, 2005). As the volume of publications of this nature accumulates, however, it raises doubt whether it is still possible to find a new work that might be original and referential.

It is in this sense that the book *“Poder, medios, cultura: una mirada crítica desde la economía política de la comunicación”* can be welcomed as a novelty. This compilation edited by Luis Alfonso Albornoz – Professor at the Carlos III University of Madrid (Spain), founding member and president of the Latin Union of Political Economy of Information, Communication and Culture (ULEPICC) – is interesting for two reasons. First of all, it brings together authors from different trends in the field, such as the North American –Vincent Mosco e Gaëtan Tremblay (Canada) –, the Latin

American – Micael Herschmann, César S. Bolaño (Brazil), Delia Crovi Druetta (Mexico) –, and the European one – Armand Mattelart (France), Philip Schlesinger (U.K.), Enrique Bustamante, Ramón Zallo, Francisco Sierra (Spain), besides the editor himself who stands at the intersection of the European and the Latin American studies. Second, it proposes a provocative reflection on the achievements and limits of the discipline up to this date.

The book consists of eleven articles, organized in four sections. Unfortunately, an introductory text that could help readers in the identification of authors and topics discussed is missing. Notwithstanding, such absence is offset by the clarity of the themes approached and the articulation established between its parts.

Thus, chapters I and IV are closely related in the sense that they are dedicated to mapping the field and to make suggestions for a renewed research agenda. The first part of the book includes articles by Zallo and Mosco trying to articulate new names in the field to the established "traditions" and pointing out urgent issues to deal with in the current restructuring of the communications and culture markets. The last section is devoted in turn to the construction of a renewed "political-technological agenda", as Albornoz calls it, in which one considers not only the technical advances of communication, but the socio-political contexts that guide and result of such developments. As Albornoz and Crovi Druetta highlight the most urgent topics to deal with, Bolaño presents the thread to sewing these various themes into the PECC's flag: the maintenance of the critical bias in relation to the social and economic order established.

In turn, parts II and III bring theoretical and methodological discussions. The second chapter presents a provocative analysis on the term "creative industries" and its consequences for the formulation of cultural policies. In their articles, Schlesinger, Tremblay, and Bustamante agree that the way the discussion about "creativity" has been conducted in official documents presents a remarkable inconsistency that allows the inclusion of a very different set of economic activities under the rubric of "culture". From architecture to furniture design, from fashion to computer and electronic games, the only unequivocal connection between all these activities is that they generate some kind of intellectual property. Equating intellectual property to "culture" and taking this expression as the key to the economic growth in post-industrial economies, the political bias of the debate on cultural policies is exchanged for a more technical approach. The problem is thus that the epicentre of the debate on public policy to communications and culture is taken away from the forums dedicated to "culture" (ministries, departments, chambers), moving it to those concerned with trade (industry and foreign trade). There, the concern lies less on the preservation of local/national identities or on the democratization of the access to information and to cultural goods as on the competitiveness of a national creative economy in the global market of symbolic goods. The result is the adoption of conservative policies in relation to these markets (strengthening of copyright, reduction of public services in favour of private enterprise).

The third section brings an interesting proposal for methodological renewal. The chapter is dedicated to "cultural consumption", a topic traditionally ignored by the political economists. But it is worth noting that its presence in this compilation is not only due to the central role assumed by consumption in the contemporary

capitalism. In the articles of Mattelart, Herschmann and Sierra, the reader will notice an effort to bring together two disciplines now distanced, the PECC and cultural studies. These authors believe that as the cultural studies shared a critical bias in the analysis of cultural phenomena, at least in its origin, they could provide methodological subsidies required to perform a more complete analysis of the production of information and cultural goods. That is, the emphasis on the actions of individuals given by the cultural studies could complement the lack of social actors in the political economy researches, strongly interested in relations between companies and states. Thus what is manifested in this gesture of "resumption of negotiations" is indeed a concern in updating the methods and research techniques.

The reading of the articles in sequence makes clear that there is a serious concern about the PECC's state of the art. The continuous stress on the renewal of themes, the search for dialogue with other theories, and the expansion of the methods of research reveals the awareness of a deficit that must be remedied. In this sense, some attitudes represent important steps such as the openness to phenomenology through the consideration of "consumption".

However, if this is the goal, it is noteworthy that there are few references to other important approaches to economic life in vogue today. Scarce are the references to economic sociology, economic anthropology, or even the new institutional economics. Where and how the PECC is situated in relation to these disciplines? They have already made their epistemological renewal, and gain increasing legitimacy in academia – as the Nobel Prize given to Oliver E. Williamson reminds us. Thus they can also contribute to theoretical and methodological developments for the study of culture and communications markets and firms. Although the diplomatic attitude in relation to cultural studies is admirable, it is necessary to establish bridges with those authors and disciplines dedicated to the analysis of the economic life, for, despite the efforts of renovation, there is a danger to keep the anachronisms.

It is clear that far from being just another collection of articles "Poder, medios, cultura" opens new horizons to the PECC. The reflections that these renowned authors produced indicate a time to stop looking inward and expanding frontiers. And this is the great achievement of this work. It does not seek the consecration of a discipline. It aims redesign to perpetuate the PECC in the 21st century.

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About the book:

Author	Title	City	Publishing house	Year	Pages
ALBORNOZ, L. A. (org.)	Poder, medios, cultura: una mirada crítica desde la economía política de la comunicación	Buenos Aires	Paidós	2011	280