

RESEARCH

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**CULTURAL STUDIES AS A TOOL BOX FOR INDICATING
COMMUNICATION PROCESSES IN CONSERVATIVE
RESTORATION IN LATIN AMERICA**

**LOS ESTUDIOS CULTURALES COMO CAJA DE HERRAMIENTAS
PARA INDAGAR LOS PROCESOS DE COMUNICACIÓN EN LA
RESTAURACIÓN CONSERVADORA EN AMÉRICA LATINA**

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ABSTRACT

This article will deal with the institutionalization in the field of communication studies in Latin America in the last two decades of the twentieth century, focusing mainly on cultural studies, its centrality at that time and its subsequent development. Several factors make this study relevant for a series of disciplines: from communication to history of América: the US influence in the area competing with the –once- also powerful European influence coming from immigrants or whatever predominant power there was in a specific moment. The aim is to raise some questions regarding the status of cultural studies in a context of neoliberal conservative restitution. Supplying historic perspective and roots to today's discussions about the matter, and to the debate that it can initiate at a professional and academic level in both universities and workplaces or diverse social environments. So it can result in useful conclusions for its study and practice, both from the technical, social and human perspectives, granting they'll be coherent with the characteristic factors of identity both for the geopolitical region and the very own debate.

KEY WORDS: cultural studies – communication – power – culture - Latin America

RESUMEN

En este trabajo nos proponemos repasar la institucionalización del campo de estudios de comunicación en América Latina en las últimas dos décadas del Siglo XX, poniendo el foco en los estudios culturales, su centralidad en aquel momento y su desarrollo posterior. Varios factores hacen este estudio relevante para una serie de materias, desde la propia comunicación hasta la historia de América: la influencia de Estados Unidos enfrentada a la –en tiempos- también poderosa influencia europea

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traída en muchos casos por los inmigrantes, o por empresarios y diplomáticos de cualquiera que fuera la potencia europea dominante en un momento dado. El objetivo es ensayar algunas preguntas respecto del estatuto de los estudios culturales en un contexto de restitución neoliberal conservadora. Aportando perspectiva histórica y raigambre a los presentes argumentos sobre la materia, y al debate que esta puede suscitar a nivel profesional y académico en universidades, centros de trabajo y entornos sociales diversos. De forma que este desemboque inequívocamente en conclusiones útiles a su estudio y aplicación, tanto desde la perspectiva técnica como social y humana, y garantizando que estas serán coherentes con los factores definitorios de la identidad tanto de la región geopolítica como del debate mismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: estudios culturales – comunicación – poder – cultura – América Latina

OS ESTUDOS CULTURAIS COMO CAIXA DE FERRAMENTAS PARA INDAGAR OS PROCESSOS DE COMUNICAÇÃO NA RESTAURAÇÃO CONSERVADORA NA AMÉRICA LATINA

RESUME

Neste trabalho propomos repassar a institucionalização do campo de estudos de comunicação na América Latina nas últimas duas décadas do século XX, colocando o foco nos estudos culturais, na centralidade naquele momento, e seu desenvolvimento posterior. O objetivo é ensaiar algumas perguntas a respeito do estatuto dos estudos culturais em um contexto de restituição neoliberal conservadora.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Estudos culturais – Comunicação – Poder – Cultura.

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1. INTRODUCCION. COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICA: MOVEMENTS AND TRANSFORMATIONS.

By the 1980s, it could be seen in the Southern Cone that something was changing in the field of communication, which manifests itself in the displacement of communication as a matter of media towards culture as a space of identities; of communication as a matter of devices towards the gaze placed on the subjects, everyday life as a space for the production of identity; and of reception as reproduction to reception as production. (Saintout, 2003)

These movements within the field of communication were linked to the appropriation of the theoretical and methodological proposal of the Cultural Studies especially to put into discussion the linearity and simplicity with which the communication process had been thought in some cases and the residual place assigned to reception, to think the non-correspondence of the moments of emission and reception and the indeterminacy of the latter by the former, and fundamentally the possibility of recognizing the own conditions of existence of reception in front of the limits imposed on the possible "readings" at the source pole (Hall, 1980). But also to break with certain economic determinism given by the simple relationship between base/superstructure that provided a residual and merely reflective role to culture (Hall, 1994)

These proposals, together with many others, meant a valuable contribution to the field of communication. However, many studies, by maximizing their positions, ended up completely depriving cultural industries of their importance in the communication system, granting all power to the recipient. Adhering to the idea of a capacity for absolute resignification, they forgot to think about the power relations that social relations go through.

There has been innumerable criticism of the inscription of communication in the territory of cultural studies. The most solid ones had to do fundamentally with a culturalist use, where the dimensions of power are blurred, with the emergence of the idea that the senses float in the air without any kind of material constraint; where inequalities are only differences detached from any historical anchoring. This condition must be very much associated with the context in which this production was developed.

In many cases, research in communication became the communicational branch of postmodern thought. At a time when the dominant paradigm in almost all fields was based on the idea of the end of history, politics, fragmentation and the rise of market, communication studies tended to forget their critical positions and commitment with collective causes. An epistemology absolutely consistent with the neoliberal system.

Saintout (2011) indicates, in a detailed work on the development of socio-cultural studies in this historical period, that in the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America research in social sciences, which was professionalized and institutionalized in an accelerated manner, worried very little about the media, thus marking a continuity with common sense that stated that the media were "obvious", that they speak for themselves, that is, it is not necessary to problematize them. And when social science did take care of the media, it did it in a purely descriptive sense: descriptive of "what there is". The best proof of this is the so-called studies of political economy of means detached from a critical position beyond description. Or those cultural studies, which definitely announced that the issue was not the means but the ways of using remote control. Provided with an entire arsenal of concepts, theories and even questions from postmodern epistemologies as the ideology of neoliberalism of what was tried in the neoliberal decades, the existing order of communications was accepted as natural and, therefore, as impossible to be thought and transformed.

Thus, the discussions about power were diluted in the celebration of the resistance of the weak in itself that presupposed the abandonment of the wound in order to think of subalternity; the uncritical acceptance that contemporary societies are societies of audiences understood from the logic of consumption. Thus, not only the perspectives that had denounced domination and inequality and the role communication played in those processes sank into oblivion, but also the problematization of the media.

Sánchez Ruiz eloquently synthesizes this situation which we are reporting:

The preferred form of inquiry and intellectual fashion of the nineties was cultural studies, (...) that, in becoming fashionable, hindered other complementary views and even obscured the traditional views of the Latin American social sciences. On the other hand, the reception studies (...) became a kind of `populism` of the receiver, such that after so many mediations, appropriations, resemantizations, and even subversions of the hegemonic messages, they ended up showing that the transnational oligopolies of the cultural industries were actually "little sisters of charity" (Sánchez Ruíz, 2002, p. 27)

Regarding the object of study, cultural studies reinstated reception as a place from which to interpret the communicative process in its entirety. This reception, based on the terms stated by Sánchez Ruiz, was built on the basis of detachment from the structural conditions that closes on itself: reading what?, that is, from what structural conditions? with whom? for what? are absent questions in the so-called reception studies, except for honorable exceptions.

The cracking of the neoliberal order (of course, partial) in our region and the dispute over the legitimated senses of the world order proposed by politics constituted knowledge about the link between media and culture that calls for setting again the look on the issuer, for re-signifying their power as fundamental agents in the definition of the ways of looking at the world. Both for the case of a communication other, of other means that aim to dispute those dominant senses as those that sustain, legitimize and naturalize them. This is where power takes on its historical and impregnating character in practices. That is why it is necessary to reconstruct a reflection on capitalism as a whole (in a contextual sense), in its immanence in the practices of daily life; which does not mean to be ruthless or absolute but not easy to resist. For this, cultural studies are the place from which to position one's look, as Grossberg (2009, p. 36) states: "Cultural studies have a permanent interest in the way in which power infiltrates, contaminates, limits and positions the possibilities people have to live their lives in dignified and safe ways."

2. DISCUSSION. COMMUNICATION, MEDIA AND CULTURE

What we are wondering then is how, from culture, socially shared meanings are produced. And that has been interpreted many times as a necessary invitation to abandon the study of the media. We understand that it is necessary to look again at the media but inserted in more general processes in which they are registered as fundamental actors. To think of communication as constitutive of social practices

implies thinking of culture as a significant dimension of what is social, as a arena of contention for hegemony, that is, for the power to legitimately name the visions and divisions of the world (Saintout, 2011) .

It is necessary to think about these phenomena located in a contextualized theoretical and epistemological perspective, shaped by the history of political and cultural processes and by the history of the production of knowledge in the field of communication, which allows us to adopt a political conception and to locate our look on communicational processes in the field of culture to transcend media determination but also the dissolution in individual resistances.

This positioning is retaken to account for the registration of the subjects in society and their relationship with the culture in which they live. As well as the importance of the *mass media* in material and symbolic terms in our daily life, the centrality it has in our societies, and the power of influence over the public, in subjectivities, without this meaning assigning absolute power to define behaviors, desires, aspirations, etc.

An approach of this type allows us to locate ourselves beyond the deterministic conceptions about the harmful effects of the media in the public but also to be closer to the idea that these audiences have an infinite capacity to respond to these messages and are more comprehensive insofar as they incorporate the question of power to identify what world is built and agreed upon from the subjectivity of audiences, publics, recipients...

The very characterization of the interests of Cultural Studies proposed by Grossberg guides us in this sense: the description of the ways in which everyday lives are articulated with culture within the framework of unequal power relations. If, as the author himself states: "Cultural studies deal with the role of cultural practices in the construction of the contexts of human life as configurations of power, of how power relations are structured by the discursive practices that constitute the world lived as human. They try to use the best intellectual resources available to achieve better understanding of power relations (such as the state of play and balance in a force field) in a particular context, believing that such knowledge will give people more possibilities to change the context and, therefore, the power relations. That is, they seek to understand not only the organizations of power, but also the possibilities of survival, struggle, resistance and change" (Grossberg, idem: 17); it seems essential to dispute a common sense that places cultural studies outside the discussions about the media (perhaps because of the banality or indifference with which the media are thought, or because of a certain folklorization of the notion of culture) and assigns them the place of the fragments, of marginal, of that which does not enter into public discussion. While thinking of the media seems to be a legitimate object of political economy that, due to political and epistemological preconceptions, seems to be unable to advance beyond mere description. And, on the other hand, critical perspectives prevented from linking themselves with political projects linked to popular governments due to the inability to identify in the State capabilities to articulate with emancipatory projects and imagine them beyond "populism", always pejoratively conceived.

3. CONCLUSION

In a context in which, throughout the southern cone, there is evident advance of a Right with particular characteristics in each country but with a common desire for destruction of the rights won by majorities in popular governments, it is interesting to think of the modes to build (and dispute) meanings that allow us to sustain that political hegemony (which previously and subsequently is cultural) and the modes of articulating and determining the media with daily experience. This implies the recognition of academic political positioning regarding the context, raising the need to contribute to the reconstruction of more just and egalitarian social orders. In this sense, it is interesting to recover and sustain the practice of intellectual-political work of the project of cultural studies described by Grossberg (idem, 18):

I believe that the project of cultural studies, which links different people and works, and apparently threatens many others, implies commitment to a particular practice of intellectual-political work, and to the claim that such intellectual work matters inside and outside the academy. Cultural studies are a way of inhabiting the position of the academic, the professor, the artist and the intellectual, a way (among many) of politicizing theory and theorizing politics.

What we intend to raise is the need to take a position on the media that recognizes the determinant nature of cultural industries in daily life without reducing that relationship to mere determination but noting the power in the construction of scenarios and senses that are at stake in the subjects' ordinary practices. And that, in these contexts, they are part of a social and cultural order that needs to be deciphered in order to transform it.

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