

Communication, history and memory: possible dialogues¹

Comunicação, história e memória: diálogos possíveis

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the possible dialogues between communication, history and memory, having a letter dictated by a female slave in the 19th century as the corpus. Note that this document represents a symbolic dialogue between communication and history, being an act of communication between multiple individuals. It discusses the temporalities in communication and history, the narrative acts that both produce and the contemporary disintegration of links between past, present and future, noting that the historicity is governed today by media action. Finally, it addresses the problem of memory and its presence in the world of communication and history, reflecting on the oblivion related to slavery in Brazil.

Keywords: Communication, history, memory, forgetting, epistemology

RESUMO

O artigo reflete sobre os possíveis diálogos entre a comunicação, a história e a memória, tendo como fio condutor uma carta ditada por uma escrava no século XIX. Nota que esse documento representa um emblemático diálogo entre a comunicação e a história, sendo um ato de comunicação entre múltiplos atores. Discute as temporalidades na comunicação e na história, os atos narrativos que ambas produzem e o esfacelamento contemporâneo da articulação entre passado, presente e futuro, notando que a historicidade é governada hoje pela ação midiática. Ao fim, aborda a problemática da memória e sua presença no universo da comunicação e da história, refletindo sobre os múltiplos esquecimentos relacionados à escravidão no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Comunicação, história, memória, esquecimento, epistemologia

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Communication, history and memory

My husband Mr. Luis

I really want you to be healthy and I wish you send someone to tell me where are you living. The man who bought me was a very rich man from Campinas, the man is called Marciano, I made a promise in Congo, you don't remember the promise I made you, you don't remember that your father sold you to remember the promise that you warn me in the night I was sleeping. Queen has a companion of making promises and not keeping it, and now she is lost in evil and because of that she has no saints and because of that you see that the queen is the biggest in the world and she is lost in evil and can't save herself because Saint Benedict has lost her in the sea and can't save her and because of that I am careful with saints, I hope to still accomplish that even if I have grey hair. Your owner said he wouldn't give the letter of manumission, of getting together the couple responsible also of getting together, getting married, they earned money to pay their owner for the letter of manumission. I want to get married together to not spend money and later then earn money and pay first, pay my promise, then pay your owner otherwise I'll be like the queen. (AESP, *A Justiça versus Claro e Pedro, escravos do cônego Fidélis Alves Sigmaringa de Moraes*, 1868-1872, cited in Wissembach, 1998, pp. 114-115, the original spelling was maintained)

WHY DOES A letter dictated by a 19th century slave written by another contemporary slave serves as a tool to begin these reflections that will seek to establish what we are calling possible dialogues between communication, history and memory?

The letter that Teodora dictated for the slave of gain Claro to write to her husband Luís has all the communication codes that allowed her to be transported in time, intactly arriving to the 21st century to be interpreted within new parameters and new perspectives.

The first topic for observation is the most emblematic dialogue between communication and history, since what remains lasting in the form of signs and inscriptions of the past are exactly the communicative acts of multiple individuals that the passage of time has transformed into our predecessors. It is the communicative act that establishes concomitance, capable of producing a hiatus in time and transporting, from the past to the present, lasting vestiges that only lasted for being communicative acts.

Communicative acts are, therefore, produced actions and reactions capable of prefiguring time in a dimension in which bonds and connections of the past are made present and glimpsed as future.

In Teodora's letter, transformed into an inscription, we can also observe the works of the slave's memory and, at the same time, the codes of an orality that produces the instantaneous migration of the voice toward the paper and its permanence as a sign of a time. The writing, which has the central function of freeing memory, allowing it to be forgotten, here appears as a kind of transit of memory towards a time that will remain lasting.

In her memory Teodora recalls the promises that she had made to the saints, the fact that he had been "bought" by a rich young man from Campinas named Marciano. She recalls the codes of her lived life and, at the same time, the codes of her beliefs. But the future is also present in the narrative composition: the desire for freedom expressed by the will of obtaining enough money to buy her letter of manumission would free her from the present and bring her into a new time. A future in which she glimpsed freedom.

On the other hand, Teodora's letters are, today, documents of the 19th century with all the inherent characteristics of the document as a trail produced by the passage of the men of the past. And, as such, they are objects of the attentive look of those who seek to interpret them under the most varied possibilities. Whatever may be the trace documents transformed into the raw material of history, they are, first of all, vestiges, indicating the existence of a past and from where were generated communicative acts that remained lasting, as traces or as remains, as evidence or as materialities of the past. Mineral, written, sound, photographic, audiovisual and virtual, the sources are acquiring the materiality of the technologies that dominate the epochs and, as such, are left to a researcher who consciously, deliberately and justifiably, tries to interpret them and rebuild a particular sequence of the past. The produced analysis means restoring the sequence to the researcher's contemporaries in the form of a narrative, that is, of a writing endowed with internal coherence and replete with scientific intelligibility.

We also stress that the sources do not exist in essence nor are they endowed with a neutrality capable of reflecting truths about a bygone period. The vestiges of the past, be they a testimony or a document, only become historical sources at the moment the researcher assigns them that qualification. It is in this sense that we can agree with the premise expressed by Henri Rousso (1996) that every source is "invented" (p. 3). Likewise, we must emphasize that sources are not endowed with intrinsic questions, depending always on the interpretive versions derived from them, based on questions formulated by researchers. The source does not exist out of the researcher's question and focus.

Teodora's letter, which tells a story, carries out works of memory, emphasizes beliefs and reaffirms promises, all in a writing that can only be deciphered if it is read, one or more times, aloud. It is an example of the transits we can establish

between communication, history and memory. The oral practices overflowed in narratives fixed in the prison of the written word, and the memory that would be freed by the writing, en rigueur, remain lasting in the scriptural modes, reaffirming memories, forgettings and games of assimilation and accommodation contained in the memory transformed into written matter by Claro for Teodora. Writing is, thus, the narrative of a past that endures. Writing is here, finally, a communicative act that can be glimpsed as a transit between communication, memory and history.

COMMUNICATION AND HISTORY: CONFLUENCES

Therefore, when we refer to communication and history, we look for moving away from the dictates of considering them merely as two disciplines or two fields of knowledge, each with its universe, its particularities and its differences.

Communication and history are also narrative transits that establish the prevalence of temporal modes of living life. Thus, the temporal issue, in our view, indicates the dominant reflexive place of both communication and history. As Marc Bloch (1976) used to say, “the science of men in time”² (p. 29) when referring to history. And the dominant time for history is what is called the past. On the other hand, communication, as a theoretical place for reflection of communication processes and practices, privileges the absolute present. There is in the communication the prevalence of reflections on still ongoing processes and even an excessive attention to themes that are emblematically built around empirical materials of the everyday life of contemporary practices. The time of communication is definitely the time passing.

The second correlation between communication and history relates to the narrative acts that they both produce. If we consider a narrative as the configuration of existence when experiencing ordinary and banal acts, i.e. that we produce narratives from the way we put ourselves in the world, we observe that life lived as a narrative act is the product of the interpretation of both communication and history. To narrate is a way of being in the world. Thus the actions of men in the present and in the past are temporal experiences narrated and reconfigured by the interpretations we construct in communication and history.

Our experience in the world develops in time. And if, on the one hand, historical connectors allow us to access the remnants of the past – material culture, lived memory, documents, sequence of generations – producing narrative identities toward the construction of historical time, on the other, our action in the absolute present produces other narrative identities that are materialize in textual actions. Communication acts in presence.

² The phrase by Marc Bloch is expressed in the work *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien*. The version to which we refer, *Introdução à história*, was published by Publicações Europa-América, in Portugal.

The themes and problems in the field of communication studies have as focus unfinished processes of an extremely fast time that incessantly establishes new scenarios, which, under the aegis of technological change, foreshadow a new time, but that, in fact, repeat cultural logics of immediately preceding moments. The transformation at every moment is demanded to be experienced when in reality the apparatuses presented are part of a same chain of signification that refers to the extremely fast velocity and instantaneity, which allow no pauses and reflections capable of producing lasting interpretations about this time that, without another better qualification, we call contemporary. What is the reason for this preference for ultracontemporary processes, for empirical objects that sometimes collapse in the course of analyses aimed at an exacerbated presentism?

If on the one hand we can offer an attempt of interpretation from the very definition of what is the theme of communication analysis – not necessarily the means and production of media, but the connections created daily in the world of life in the contemporary processes mediated by communication (Sodré, 2015) –, on the other we must consider the way the temporality lives, as we are immersed in a movement of contemporary experience in which the articulation between past, present and future seems to have been destroyed. In the current regime of historicity (Hartog, 2014) we are living a crisis of time, with the loss of evidence between the joints of the past, the present and the future.

As François Hartog (2014) emphasizes, the production of historical time seems to be suspended, making the contemporary experience to be marked by a perpetual present, “inaccessible and almost immobile that seeks, nevertheless, to produce for itself its own historical time” (p. 39). It is as if there is nothing besides the present.

TO LIVE IS TO BE HISTORICAL

Thus, when living his own history everyday, in ordinary and banal acts, the man becomes aware of his place in the world and of his temporality in this world. We cannot think that the human being does not know the historical relations. To exist is simply to live in history.

History, therefore, is not only the subject, gathered over the centuries by narrative forms and, above all, by struggles for meaning in the sense of building a legitimate and recognized knowledge. History is the fact of being in the world, living the existence in constitutive bonds with the other and realizing the time by living in time. History is historicity.

Therefore, when the issue of history emerges, a distinction must be made between the names placed in this universe: on the one hand, history as subject

and its struggles for classification and for holding the valid knowledge about the past, with its theories, i.e. the critical thinking about the historiographic making, linked to several theoretical affiliations; and, on the other hand, the emergence of the historical being.

Some trace the emergence of this critical thinking about the historical knowledge in the 19th century (Collingwood, 2001, p.14). For Collingwood (2001), the production of Western scientific reason took place between the 16th and 19th centuries, with the concentration of human thought in the creation of the foundations of natural science and in the transformation of philosophical reason, which starts having as “its main theme the relation of the human mind as subject to the natural world of things around it in space as object” (p. 11). The same man who had learned to think critically of natural forces then started thinking the history in the same way, which became the specific form of thought.

The historical, organized and systematic investigation that emerged with the institutionalization of the subject in the 19th century also produced reflections on the historical issue in four lines of analyses – the definition, the object, which procedures, and what is history for? – which, roughly speaking, constitute what is called the philosophy of history.

But, when reflecting about the past from the present, and considering the accumulated knowledge of the past, the historiography must also be thought of as a cultural practice and a mental structure of an era which presents itself in the form of a writing, with all possibilities and restrictions imposed by the scriptural activity (Malerba, 2006, p. 22).

It is in this sense that Paul Ricoeur defines historiography as a specific way of manifesting historical consciousness, given that the stage of writing introduces the “as of” of the narrative, i.e. the possibility of the historian representing the past as it might have been, and not as the past, even if in the expression there is manifested the intention of true reconstruction of the past (Ricoeur, 2007).

History is, therefore, the way we feel in duration, how we visualize ourselves as being, along a path, which we classify as existence in a space (which we, sometimes, call the world). History is our silent or noisy relationship with the present, the past and the future. History is the fact that we are in the world.

From the present, from our ever transient now, we look at the past and project the future. But the past exists only as a mental representation from the individual look of the one who uncovers it. The past is not fixed: it is materialized by memories and always transformed by the interpretation we make. The past is the memorable bond established from the present. Memory thus becomes a fundamental connector that nourishes the past, making it present at same time.

On the other hand, the present indicates what we live, but also the remembrances provided by the past. These remembrances always exist in the present, building it by the intertwining of the present itself (the lived actions) and of the other (the remembrances that make the past, present). Of the present itself and of the other, also, because being life an act of historicity, we always live in relationship: there is a world inhabited by beings who equally live the same humanity.

When we say *we used to be* or *we will be* we constitute ourselves in time. We are aware that we have an earlier history, that we are enveloped in a history that began long before our existence but continues to affect us. This history of others (of the past) is also our history: the history of a humanity that exists across centuries. We are time.

When we know that not-to-be means not being here, we are putting in relation the fact that we are space. That is, we are only constituted as subjects in history in space, being here, in the present, having been here, in the past, and being here already in the future. In the same way that we always are, even when we were not here, since other men narrated their sagas and made human existence real, similarly other sagas will be told of this past in the future, so that even no longer being, we will be in time and in space (Heller, 1993).

Historicity is therefore the consciousness of our humanity: of being human and, at the same time, mortal; of carrying millions of years, of course, by various systems of objectification, since we appropriate our humanity through these systems: it is by the language, by the rules of use of objects, by what we call customs, traditions, habits, science, etc. that we perceive and know how to behave as humans.

Who are we, where did we come from, where are we going? These are questions that accompany the human being in his historicity and that constitute the so-called theories of knowledge and, at the same time, uncover the stages of historical consciousness in which we are inserted.

Historicity, therefore, is how we understand humans in the time/space dimension and also how they are transformed in history. These transformations, for which we give multiple explanations, demarcate epochs, periods, characters and are directly related to the degree of historical consciousness of the man (Heller, 1993).

But one has to think of the actions of this same man in the world, producing transformations, lacerations, brutalities, holocausts, destructions. Thus, one must think of *regimes of historicities* characteristic of each moment and place.

Defined in two ways by François Hartog (2014), regimes of historicity would be, in the first place, the ways society treats its past and about its past. In

the second, it would designate “the modality of self-consciousness of a human community” (pp. 28-29) that is established from different modes of relation to time, that is, forms of experience of time.

They would therefore be a heuristic tool, which would help the historian to better understand, above all, moments of crisis of time. It is in this sense that we can use them as a category to demarcate the specificity of the present in relation to the past, present and future relationship, when the articulations between these dimensions become fluid, marking a moment in which “the production of historical time seems to be suspended”, as in our contemporary experience of a perpetual present. There is nothing besides the present. The past is included in the present and the future is only realized in this ultra-extended present.

The fact that we live in a world marked by relationships that are permanently established in the scope of media is undoubtedly one of the decisive factors for the outbreak of this extended present, which includes past and future. There is a contemporary historicity governed by the media action and by the fact that we live marked by real/virtual relations that only take place in the media scope. Life presents itself as a great media.

WHAT ABOUT THE MEMORY?

We leave as final reflection exactly the problematic of memory and how it is present both in the universe of communication and of history. Memory is not confused with history, not only because memory is a fundamental concept for understanding temporal articulations, but also because of other aspects.

Memory, therefore, would be a life operation, whereas history would be a scientific operation, constantly carrying out, according to Nora (1993), an “always problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what no longer exists” (p. 9).

Secondly, one must consider the distinction from the notion of testimony. The testimonial textualities so dear to narrative productions of the means of communication, especially to the journalistic ones, introduce the observation of the *I was there*, but also its attestation (if you were also there, you can attest what I say for being there) and its confrontation (what I saw as a witness is similar or not to what you also saw by being there). Thus, whereas memory concerns the declaratory level of testimony, history relates to the documentary level that attests the presumed truth as indisputable, present in historical epistemology as true discourse about the past. The document is characterized by its indiciality, whereas the testimony is based on the assumption of trust granted to those who were there (Chartier, 2009, pp. 21-22).

The third difference between memory and history opposes reminiscence and historical construction and their explanations, by the criterion of regularities, causalities, and reasons. That is, historiographic operation seeks an explanation of past events at various operational levels, whereas memory produces the entry into the past by the path of reminiscence constructed as gaps for this past from the present.

The fourth distinction relates to the recognition of the past and the representation of the past, being the memory – based on the assumption of fidelity to the past – the possibility of recognizing it. Whereas history, based on documents that are, *en rigueur*, vestiges of this past, has the intention of accessing it from the documentary materiality. The enigma of recognition is part of the memorable operation, while in the historiographic operation the representation of the past is at stake. Representational representance, i.e. in the words of Chartier (2009), “the capacity of historical discourse for representation of the past” (pp. 23-24). Thus, whereas history is governed by the epistemology of truth, memory is governed by the regime of belief in its fidelity to the past.

And the means of communication in general, especially in narratives with an aim of attesting the reliability of what has actually happened, produce a textual articulation based on the notion of testimony. Thus, journalistic texts, for example, must show the presence of a real subject in the course of events (whether of the journalist himself or others who take the role of witnesses), confront what is said between several witnesses and, finally, put on the scene the contradictory (divergent opinions and views, assuming that the various sides of those involved in the plot must be heard to produce a text with an aim to exemption). From the declaratory level of testimony, they produce a version of the event with the pretension to be, since its construction, a kind of archive for history. Thus, if some kind of generalization could be made, what the means of communication do is produce a presumably valid and common memory, inserting it into history and not into memory.

To speak of memory is, in short, to refer to three fundamental dimensions: it is always positioned, it is of the present, and it establishes itself in the dialectic relationship between memory and forgetting.

It is in this sense that we retake in these reflections the memorable speech of Teodora, transformed into vestige by the scriptural action of Claro, slave of gain.

Revealing the cultural transits of those enslaved in the 19th century, from the memorable tricks present in the narratives that transcended the boundaries of time, Teodora’s letter reveals complex communicative modes in a world in which memory works were configured as strategies of resistance. To remember the past, to reconstruct trajectories meant, also, to be inserted in time and in life.

But these communicative acts were for centuries masked by a policy of forgetfulness in relation to Brazilian slavery. What leads us to think in terms of palimpsests of forgetting when we refer to the diaspora of slavery, leading us to overcome territorial limits and think of it at the transnational level.

There is a lot of forgetfulness about slavery. The first of them is the non-recognition of the communication practices of these men and women who constituted the largest contingent of Brazilian population in the 19th century. For three centuries Brazil received, according to estimates, one million slaves from different parts of Africa. Here they produced enduring modes of communication, blending into their extremely complex oral practices, literate ways of communicating. They knew how to read, write and tell. They had skills that made them occupy unlikely professions, such as booksellers, amanuenses, carpenters, hatters, among dozens of others, showing the imperative of handling reading and writing. Now and then, we can see the signatures they put on the letters of manumission and other papers. We can also see the letters they wrote, the poems they built, the writings of oneself, about oneself and many times for others (Barbosa, 2013, 2016). However, these modes of communication have been silenced for centuries.

The testimony is capable of leading each of us to the content of the *things of the past*, while at the same time effecting the historiographic operation. The established epistemological process starts from a declared memory, passes through the file and documents and ends in the documentary evidence. To deal with the issue of testimony, therefore, is to refer to the declaratory moment and its inscription (the archived memory). And it may emerge every time it is triggered, this declaratory memory inscribed in documentary form starts representing the past by narratives, through several rhetorical devices. At last, the testimony is sealed by filing and sanctioned by documentary proof (Ricoeur, 2007, p. 170).

As historical subjects, the enslaved are silenced subjects when the testimonial action is brought to the light. Their communication practices are actions placed on the threshold of forgetting also in other territories to where they were taken. They are transcultural, transnational, revealing deterritorialized forms of domination, producing forgetfulness, becoming more and more extinguished as they move in time. Palimpsests of forgetting in constant flux and permanent updating.

With the assumption that the past compared to the other is presented in an intertwined form, being reciprocally projected in the others, Huysen (2014) highlights, regarding the memory of trauma, the question of the strategy of supplantment, as if the trauma of the other should be “supplanted, in the hierarchy of suffering, by the sacrifice and suffering of the subject himself” (pp. 180-181).

To supplant, according to the author, is opposed to intertwine, but he recognizes these two strategies of politics of memory as inextricably linked.

It is not about establishing hierarchies of memory (and of forgetting) of traumatic suffering, constructing a sort of ranking to see who would have the right to assert his suffering as the greatest in the face of other sufferings, but to glimpse what we are calling figures of forgetting.

The first figure of forgetting in relation to slavery can be observed in the dominant silence that hangs in the air when the subject is approached. It is as if it had not been here, in the cities and in the fields, that men and women were enslaved a little over a hundred years ago. There is an forgetfulness of reserve and forgetfulness due to erasure of traces (Ricoeur, 2007).

The second figure of forgetfulness can be revealed by many of the descriptions of the barbarities to which these people were subjected and which trigger in our memories traumatic events that still happen today in Brazil. How can we not remember those who are imprisoned without guilt, brought under the sign of the strength of their families and displaced to other territories where they will find death, of those who are tortured in broad sight, from a guilt defined a priori by the color of the skin? How can we not compare, in contemporary times, the scenes of slaves being tortured in a public square or dying because of the inhuman beatings with those of contemporary men subjected to public lynchings, everyday barbarities that lead to the public torture of subjects considered deviant just because they have a black body?

If we consider the forgetting from degrees of depth, as Ricoeur (2007) does in an attempt to construct a pragmatics of forgetfulness, there would be two great figures of forgetfulness: deep forgetfulness or by erasure of traces and forgetfulness of reserve.

The traces of slavery, but above all, the traces indicating the complex life of the slaves in Brazilian territory were systematically erased. Various types of erasure are observed in relation to their modes of communication.

But there is also the forgetfulness of reserve, the one that affects so deeply that it established lasting and persistent marks, which come back periodically. And from insistently coming back, from insistently being recognized, they produce forgetfulness of reserve, i.e. they remain forgotten, but as a possibility of being recognized again.

Slavery is subjected to multiple forgetfulness. But perhaps the most significant is its submission to forgetfulness of reserve. Sometimes, on fundamental dates, there is a *boom* of reflections around the theme, but in everyday life there is the commanded forgetting of practices and actions that put on opposite sides people who are subjects of the same history and who have the same humanity.

When proposing the perception of forgetfulness as a dialectic of memory, Paul Ricoeur (2007) also enumerates the collective forms of forgetfulness, i.e. forgetfulness of memory, the uses and abuses of memory. Due to the different degrees of manifestation of forgetting, he establishes a typology of uses and abuses, particularizing the blocked memory, the manipulated memory and the obligated memory, or commanded forgetting (amnesty).

In an intense dialogue with Freud, in the first case he emphasizes the covering memories and the question of remembering being action and transformation. As for the second case, the author speaks of manipulated memory, manifest forgetfulness, active forgetfulness, when making the selection between what will be narrated and what will remain in the dimension of the forgotten. The selection of the mediating function of the narrative can turn the abuses of memory into abuses of forgetting. Not only does one select what will be narrated, but, according to Ricoeur (2007), “one can always recount differently, by eliminating, by shifting the emphasis, by recasting the protagonists of the action in a different light along with the outlines of the action” (p. 455). One can organize the forgetfulness through the official history.

And lastly, he deals with commanded forgetting: amnesty. That is, from the act of amnesty as commanded amnesia. In this dimension, amnesty has selective and punctual prescription of something that needs to be forgotten, establishing forgetfulness about the original fault. Here we have the dimension of institutional forgetting, in which the past that is placed under an interdict assumes a new dimension. According to Ricoeur (2007), the goal is “to extinguishing memory in its testimonial expression and to saying that nothing has occurred” (p. 455).

Even though in the forgetting layers in relation to slavery we can identify figures of forgetting that are readapted as they move in time, we also observe the dimension of prescription of this monstrous event that nevertheless lasts. There is also in relation to slavery, the commanded forgetting, but not as amnesty. The purpose is to say that it did not occur, but not to forget the original fault. A lasting transnational and transcontinental interdiction is constructed in layers over which other layers are built and hardened in a perpetual movement of interdiction of a past which, having existed to this day, is not fully recognized.

And its non-recognition means its permanence in time, making the differences, the effectiveness of the black body as the natural target of barbarism maintained and naturalized by memorable mechanisms, which, by denying the past, construct exclusion as a dominant web of social relations in Brazil. ■

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