

From culture to cyberculture (cibercultur@) and knowledge process

■ Entrevista com JORGE A. GONZÁLEZ*
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Mexican researcher Jorge A. González Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) is well-known by Brazilians since he has taught courses, made conferences and published articles in many of the country's journals. His studies on popular culture and TV soap operas, from which the concept of *cultural fronts* emerged, made him connected to a group of Latin-American authors that includes Jesús Martín-Barbero, Néstor García Canclini among others. His books *Más(+)* *Cultura(s): ensayos sobre realidades plurales*, published in 1994, and *La cofradía de las emociones (in)terminables: miradas sobre telenovelas em México*, published in 1998, are representative of his current research. His research keeps emphasizing the cultural dimension, but are growing towards the development of the notion of *cibercultur@* - seen as an object of study and as a possible source of social development and empowerment - And thinking over knowledge process, based on genetic epistemology. In the following interview, Mr. González discusses some aspects of his research.

MATRIZES: Lately, you have been considered in association with Canclini, Martín-Barbero and others, that is to say, with Latin-American cultural studies. What do you think of this term? Is it valid to classify these authors? Do they share a view on

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the study of communication and culture? And if this concept is valid, what are its characteristics?

González: I have never felt included inside the term *cultural studies*. I've always referred to my work as *studies of culture*, because *cultural studies* is a term used in the Anglo-Saxon world, namely, in the USA and in England. We started off as *studies of culture* in Mexico, in 1976, 1978. *Cultural studies* is a term with no meaning to me, personally, as a concept it has never meant anything, it's a workable concept, but I don't see myself in it. It seems to be an odd delimitation, but it is not so. Note that, even though Anglo-Saxon cultural studies and us, from Mexico, have many sources in common, like Gramsci and Marx, they have other stories, other intellectuals and, besides, they are inside the empire. My name is sometimes associated with Canclini and Martín-Barbero – this used to be more common in the past, but it has been a while since we have been considered together in Latin-America. And this makes sense, because Canclini does studies of Mexican and Latin-American culture and Martín-Barbero also has some interesting ideas on Latin-American mediacy.

MATRIZES: On the field of reception studies, you have created the concept of cultural fronts. Could you talk about this perspective, mentioning the reception of the concept and if it had any developments in your thinking or in that of other authors, as well as its unfolding in empirical studies?

González: I never came up with the concept of fronts with reception in mind. It has been classified as that in Latin America, at least I've seen some papers on that, that mention reception studies and cultural fronts, that is to say, Guillermo Orozco with TV mediation and Jorge González with cultural fronts. I believe that my explanation on fronts isn't about reception, but that isn't all. The conceptualization of cultural fronts is a theoretical and methodological conception in order to study how the everyday life hegemonies are built- yes, it derives directly from what is called reception studies. But the way of working with the categories of cultural fronts, I started with popular religion: shrines as cultural fronts. I never thought about reception. Then I thought about the "feria"¹, about the process of turning it into a ceremony, about how people organize themselves in order to celebrate. And the third object, soap-operas, established the category of *cultural fronts*, since the 1982 World Congress of Sociology in Mexico. The

¹ Spanish Word meaning 'street fair'. San Marco Fair, also called Fair of Mexico is a festivity that occurs during San Marco's holiday. There are stands selling food, craft; there musical shows, bullfights and more.

empirical studies started in 1981 and lasted up to 1995. In other words, from 1982 to 1992, I worked with these three objects: popular religion, urban fairs and soap-opera. Production isn't the same as composition. The broadcasters haven't made any progress on theoretical concepts, but it can be useful, indirectly, to deal with reception studies. It's important to regard reception as a building process of a social hegemony that cannot be delimited, limited or reduced.

MATRIZES: In 1995 you published an article claiming that, in spite of the soap-operas in Latin-America, very little was known about it. Fifteen years of research later, what has been revealed about soap-operas? What do your and other researchers' results show? Is soap-opera still as central in the Latin-American cultural system today, against a background of digital media and new media?

González: I've dedicated only 6 years of full-time research to this. Two years inside Televisa's soap-opera production and many other years studying the dynamics of family life with TV, what the family does with the soap-opera. I had to approach the object from different scales of representation. So, in order to study Televisa's soap-opera production, I joined a TV crew. I had to work on the relations between the productions studios, and I also researched the peculiarities and characteristics of a production crew inside the studio. Just as elements. I had to build the relationship between one TV crew and other crews. And the structure of production explains certain characteristics that I described. I had to analyze the weight of the production unit inside the TV corporation in relation to other units, like news, special events on corporation level, on production crew level, on the level of the spectacle in Mexico. Another scale of representation. Because then, in order to expound each scale of phenomena, there was different information, appropriate to each: the study of the characteristics, the decisions, the elements that make up a production crew; the study of the time, the place and the actions that take place in a soap-opera. The daily routine. From make-up, preparation, first editing, cameras, a routine. The peculiarities of this routine cannot be explained with the same routine. One needs to put it into relation with another relative totality, that is, the totality of the corporation. And this cannot be understood unless it's inside the field of Mexican spectacle, which in its turn cannot be grasped outside the field of world TV fiction. There are several levels of scales of distinct representations, several levels of information. That helped me understand, for example, what decisions a

producer makes in a contextual interaction. We have a producer, we need an actress, an actor. So we have a casting of actors, and the producer will say 'Yes you, and you too. But not her.' The producer's criteria on selection a face, a profile, a look, cannot be understood only by this context. We find out that this choice is directly related to the world market, with homogeneity repressions of language, with the notion of showing a less aggressive side, a weaker, less native American, less black side to the world market. In this way we can understand why a theater actor, graduated from an avant-guard school, isn't in the field of Mexican spectacle. In Mexico, theater is very weak when compared to other activities. So an actor has to, as they say, *prostitute* himself and do soap-operas. There he gets some money, but he isn't well paid. Those making big money are producers, the corporation, not the actors. We have an example of a Mexican soap-opera that in two weeks of exhibition already paid itself off completely. I affirm that soap-operas are the backbone of Televisa's development since the 1970's. In this year Televisa began exporting soap-operas. It's different from Brazil, because of the country's history, since there came playwrights from the communist party, the best from Brazil and Latin America. I affirm it's possible to distinguish, albeit it is not so clear cut, Globo's soap-operas with the participation of these first-rate professional playwrights from other, simpler soap-operas. The study of soap-opera is a fundamental symbolic form, as John Thompson would say, in the structure of Mexican television, but also soap-opera has a history connected with radio soap-opera, with cinema melodrama, with comic strips and theatre. It's heir to a tradition, to a very interesting transformation process and it is an industrial product with no place for impromptu. Behind soap-opera there is a much stronger planning than, say, in journalism. You have to plan for hours because the corporation puts pressure on the producer, Televisa puts pressure on the producer. We have a gigantic first-world cinema studio with high-definition cameras, a small crew and the demand for a soap-opera. Each scenario that we create has to be used intensely. All the scenes that take place against this background, even though they might be three years apart in the script, are filmed at once. That's way an actor's performance process is insane. He first has to be old, than young, he needs to improvise. His load of work is very intense, he doesn't have time to memorize the script, so he uses an earphone. We also studied the concepts of the technicians that speak to the actor's ear – we call them *apuntador*. He's directing the actor, in a way. We found anecdote elements. To get to a systematic comprehension in order to build the relations between the elements. I used my studies on the soap-opera in order to contrast empirically those of cultural fronts. Just like I used popular fairs and urban religion. The concept fit well with popular religion, understood in the shrine as popular fronts, where different ideas of the world of life converge, since they are opposed, conflicting with

each other. But there's only one Field, the religious one. I tried to analyse how the concept of cultural fronts behaved at such a strong field. The different processes that take place between field and other forms of interpretation- not reception. I never, ever use the word consumption. I believe that culture cannot be a commodity. I speak of an interpretative activity, specifically interpretative. Because something that I consume, ends. That was never clear to me. Canclini and I published a book called *El consumo cultural en México*. In the book I affirm that I don't believe in the concept of cultural consumption, it's a pretty concept, but it doesn't say anything to me about process. What we have are the historically changing process of the struggle for organization of the popular shrines - then, I changed to urban fairs. The fairs mix different fields: religious, the State, commerce (consumption), which is the economic among others. It is interesting because the story that I use in my Doctor's Thesis shows how fairs are a thoroughly popular manifestation, Native-American, that the Catholic Church turned into an all saints fair. Later, up to the 1930's I Colima, in the period after the Mexican Revolution the fair is taken away from the church by the State's government. Then merchants take the lead, in a historical process of appropriation and expropriation that allows us to understand the regularities of the fair's characteristics, of the elements that can be identified when we ask the people about when they go, how they go. It's the only way to understand lengthwise, in a reorganizing process through time. My doctorate's research was to understand how the fights and the creation of a consensus change through time. Consensus is not a dominant tendency. I have my way of seeing things, but I measure it against that of others. And finally the most complex was working with soap-opera, because there's editing, communication, media. TV to me is not even a communication medium, it's part of a discursive field whose specialization is editing. They talk about religion, about market and they take elements from these. It's a personal interpretation. My intention was to prove how, especially in melodrama and TV melodrama, this was true. What is there in common with religion? There is what I have called luminous side of existence, light, luminous, *lumen*, which is the feeling of being a creature. This feeling is before religion, religions work upon this feeling, which is fundamentally human. We are all creatures, but we are not all the same. What is having fun with fairs? How do people from Colima have fun? People from Colima can mean almost anything. It is popularly said what is drunkenness to the poor is amusement to the rich. The fair is for all, but the class differences are much stressed. I went on observation to the fair for four years. I did opinion research there, in the city too, participative observation in the fair. One year I was invited by the organizing committee to take part in the negotiation process, how one negotiates inside the fair. They wanted me on the book display - the boring part - and I wanted to be on the part

selling goods, where everybody shouted, selling their stuff. I got my hands on a book lot at production cost, almost free. So I could sell with 60% of discount in relation to others. I did this just to contrast habits. I was next to a gay who sold pottery – horrible stuff. What he sold the most was cups on the shape of female busts. And I didn't sell almost anything. Another one nearby sold sugarcane. I built a solid structure for my display, with a mat, but I only sold 5 books. Thousands of people passed me by, but they didn't even notice my books. The only ones to take notice of it were my university colleagues that have a cultural engagement to symbolic forms. Only those that recognized the cognitive dispositions to identify a book, of such and such author, ended up buying one. Other people didn't even see it. After a week I changed everything. I did like the fruit sellers. I stashed fruits, apples, bananas, because a fair is the representation of abundance. And I studied the way the sellers talked, the way they called people. Since I have a good musical ear, I learnt, changed and sold 900 books the second week. I've told this story a few times, but I haven't written about it. It was a way of empirically analyzing the pertinence of concepts such as *habitus*, the capacity of recognizing aesthetic forms: do I or do I not feel them? Lotman says that the text builds the public, the symbolic form builds the public, calls the public. All of this to say that soap-opera has many elements of recognition, studies of textual composition, of production, of editing, of reading. I built it having a solid, theoretical and methodological category in mind.

MATRIZES: In your view a complex research process, inter or multidisciplinary, is a collective activity. How to develop and strengthen such a culture in an academic environment that is traditionally individualistic?

González: The most technical answer is: developing cyberculture, developing emerging communities of research that are knots of collective intelligence where their products are at least on the same level or better than individual ones. So, like the Scriptures say, by their fruit, you shall know them. They are fruits of well organized units, diverse among the teachers, the new students. This allows for the final product to have a much higher or at least similar quality to that of individual ones. It's a way to adapt to the demands of the Ministries of Education of Brazil and Mexico, the demands of the world Bank and other decision makers. In this way we organize ourselves to fight against the egocentric culture that characterizes the scientific world when it has enough critical mass. Our countries do not have such critical mass and copy, imitate foreign, European models of schooling, condemning us to never be able to follow these models.

MATRZes: Talking about the content of your course on genetic epistemology, we can infer that it can also be seen as a general epistemology of science. What would be the position of genetic epistemology in order to think disciplinary epistemology? This question is inserted in the debate in Brazil over if there is or not an 'epistemology of communication' that can be derived from genetic epistemology.

González: In the first part of your question, genetic epistemology doesn't distinguish what is scientific from what isn't because it deals with knowledge process. Scientific and non-scientific in this case are the same. In empirical terms, cognitive process is a inter, intra, and trans-object mechanism as I explained, that allow a permanent growth process. Genetic epistemology is a subject that has as its object cognitive process. If communication is a scientific subject or operates as one, it is possible to study it as science from the perspective of genetic epistemology. Creating the science of cognitive process of Communication Science. Piaget, Rolando Garcia worked a lot on the epistemology of disciplines. There isn't yet in genetic epistemology a epistemology of Social Sciences. Epistemology doesn't deal with separate sciences. Epistemology doesn't deal with separate sciences, because it's the science of knowledge. Everybody knows them as an identical process. The basic steps of knowledge go through the categories that Piaget and Garcia discovered: inter-object, intra-object, trans-object. I don't speak of social sciences, it's a redundancy, all sciences are social. When one looks at phenomena that have to do with social facts, Durkheim would say, Sociology is born as a subject in the nineteenth century. Sociology started to be spoken of with the French Revolution. Society appears as an object –before it didn't, there were no questions about that. Knowledge advances through stages and the knowledge of the social world, of applied science to social processes very new. Rolando Garcia says that the only strong, solid theory since the foundation of Sociology, in terms of epistemology, is that of Marx. And he isn't Marxist. He mentions a seminar he had with Jacques Derrida on liberalism, capitalism crisis. Rolando was surprised when Derrida said that the only theory we had to understand this crisis was that of Marx, which anticipates what happens to the State when it loses control over the economy. Theories are theories that can anticipate. There aren't scientific methods, but forms of science, one of them is the scientific method, called historically so. The most adequate one depends on the question.

MATRIZES: I'd like you to explore the differences between genetic epistemology and Morin's proposition in relation to complex thinking.

González: In my research center we are now investigating the epistemology of society, Sociology. So we took a look at Morin, and the problem that I have with his work is that he is very interesting as an introduction, a way of calling people's attention to Social Sciences, Humanities, and he's good for opening the mind, the imagination. I use Morin in this sense and it is very interesting. When his work tries to function as theory, then I see many problems. Because I believe that what he does is a tactic – not an malevolent one – of very old rhetoric, that consists in building an enemy, an ideal adversary. I do this, draw him out of the scene and then I attack him. Morin fails at science history. He doesn't have a strong epistemology. So when I create my adversary and I attack him, the audience loves it. Rolando Garcia demolishes Morin, and Morin visited him every year. Rolando is annoyed by Morin's word that *science has been overcome, paradigm of complexity*. Morin lacks science history. We rather talk of complex systems, of complex forms, not of complexity. The word complexity is very attractive because it has to do with everything, with gadflies...But genetic epistemology shows how the human brain works. So, making differentiations is not simplistic, it's a basic, cognitive process. Morin affirms and he is right: "If we cannot control the social uses of science, we don't control science." Yes, it's a splendid idea. The current model, of German origin, is: you do the research; I pay you and keep everything. So we have a modus operandi that allows for this state of things. For a different science we have to organize ourselves in another way. Complexity is a diffuse term, integration without nuances in epistemological terms. And the differentiations that it does make aren't very pronounced they're alike. It's very sexy, but it's not a way of knowing. Morin doesn't do empirical studies. He has a theory that cannot be contrasted, for this reason.

MATRIZES: I'd like to talk now about your term *cibercultur@* (cyber culture, with an @), in which you develop three dimensions – prefix, culture and the idea of an open process. In this formulation one sees not only the concern not only with interpreting, theorizing the world, but also with transforming it. Could you talk about this commitment?

González: *Cultural fronts* is a theory created to interpret, understand small countries like ours. How did we become what we are? And I've dedicated a lot of years to this, to the national system of cultural information, to the process of cultural practices,

to technology, among other things. In 2000 I left Colima for Barcelona and I was invited to form a research institute on Culture, Art and Society. The idea was to think how would things be like in 25 years. In this way *cibercultur@* is introduced as the relation between society and technology, technology as machines that modify this symbolic circle, especially social groups outside the center, like Native-Americans, women. I'll start then by the community closest to the university, that of the teachers. The idea is that after many years dedicated to hegemony with cultural fronts, now it's time to continue that. I'm studying how this can be changed, how one goes from a stage of small knowledge about social being (Marx)- with a web of historical, social and objective relations - to a stage of full knowledge. What I can say is that I used the term *cibercultur@* and a heated debate followed to the @. The academic space is covered with cyberculture, the modulations is that contemporary culture is going through changes due to digital communication, technology, the computer. There are new symbolic forms, ways of interacting, that is to say, elements. I'll work one step before this, not how many people play *Second Life*, but how we can retrieve the capacity for self-determination of small, collective populations. I say that technology changes the way with which we relate symbolically to the world. The symbolic way in which we relate with the whole. Symbolic ecology has, to me, three very important dimensions – there might be more – but I keep in mind these three: ecology of information, of communication and of knowledge. The least developed part in Latin-America is the ecology of knowledge, because we don't socially value knowledge, we do not distribute the social supports that could engender knowledge. Communication culture is vertical, descendant, and authoritative. Culture of information is virtually inexistent. We do not nourish information. I give as an example Alexander von Humboldt², a single German who in six months walked all over and classified half the country. We must observe the education systems and the culture of information that exist in France, Germany, and England. It's not genetic. How do they nourish information? Information culture is how we relate to the world through signs, codes, that is what I'm studying. Communication culture. I don't interpret it as the culture of interchange of messages, but I see it as the coordination that is behind, the way we organize ourselves in order to foster knowledge. Poor folks don't come near books, they're excluded, they are only the object of anthropologist's books.

² Alexander Von Humboldt (1769-1859) made a famous scientific tour through Latin-America, at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. He lived for one year in Mexico.

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Traduzido para o inglês por João Marcelo Reimão Monzani