

# Critique and metacritique: contribution and responsibility of the communication theories\*

## *Crítica e metacrítica: contribuição e responsabilidade das teorias da comunicação*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the cyclical nature of the critical approaches in communication during the last 40 years in Brazil. The 1970s and 1980s were characterized by different theories that denounced the commodification of culture, the emptying of the symbolic and the hegemonic struggles over the interpretation of reality. The following 20 years were marked by the abandonment of a certain critical bias in order to focus on more specific aspects of the communicative process and product. Finally, from Boltanski's recent discussions, and through the concepts of critique and metacritique, this paper highlights the importance of widening the perspectives on communicational analysis.

**Keywords:** Communication theories, Critical theory, Criticism and metacritique

### RESUMO

Este texto discute o caráter cíclico das abordagens críticas da comunicação no Brasil nos últimos 40 anos. Os anos 70, 80 se caracterizaram por teorias de diferentes matrizes que denunciaram a mercantilização da cultura, o esvaziamento do simbólico, as disputas por hegemonia na interpretação da realidade. Os 20 anos seguintes foram marcados por certo abandono do viés crítico, em favor do tratamento de aspectos mais recortados do processo e do produto comunicativo. A partir das discussões recentes de Boltanski, situando os conceitos de crítica e metacrítica, apontamos, ao final, a importância do resgate de olhares mais abrangentes nas análises comunicacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** Teorias da comunicação, Teoria crítica, Crítica e metacrítica

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THE THEORIES, CONCEPTS and authors grouped under the aegis of *Theories of Communication* are neither homogeneous nor consensual, they even vary according to the period. At certain times, some authors and concepts are “*de rigueur*”; at others, they are abandoned and replaced. In this changing context – that witnesses the fashions and idiosyncracies constituting the field of communication studies – it is interesting to note that critical bias is also, in some way, cyclical. Some periods are marked by the strong, deprecating content of reflections; this is sometimes followed by a change of tone, leaving aside criticisms.

Nearly fifty years ago, Umberto Eco (1979 [1964]) wrote *Apocalyptic and Integrated*, providing a lucid review of the theories that were divided, at the time, between the American and the European studies – both, hostage to the fetish concept of *mass*. The work consecrated the two labels above by joining them in order to name two opposing blocks: the American administrative research (*Mass Communication Research*), with its concepts of mass culture (supposedly acritical); and the Frankfurt School, with its concept of industrial culture (rabidly critical).

Communications studies (thus named) started, in Brazil, in the 1970s, when Journalism courses became Communications courses<sup>1</sup>. It is interesting to note that, in that period, the distinction between *apocalyptic and integrated* and between critical and descriptive studies (and groups) made complete sense. The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School was in fashion as was the rejection of American studies and the Functionalist school in a division that, in the academic field, roughly reflected the left/right opposition in the political scene. The concepts of class and ideology were central, in the critical perspective.

During these forty years, theories and concepts underwent reaccommodations and changes; and today, critical perspectives such as the concept of ideology occupy an obscure and barely meaningful place. In a rough sense, this period could possibly be divided into two blocks of 20 years: the period 1970-1989, marked by the arrival and dissemination of the Critical Theory and others from the Marxist matrix; and, the period 1990-2010, that distanced itself from these perspectives, criticised and abandoned them.

This is the purpose of the present reflection, which is organized around the following themes: a brief review of the critical matrices, their abandonment, the constitution of a new theoretical-conceptual scenario and, finally, questions on where we stand and what lies ahead.

1. In 1960, the Federal Council of Education (CFE-MEC), through Resolution n° 11/69, changed the programs in Journalism into programs in Social Communications.

## CRITICAL MATRICES

An in-depth review of the critical matrices which fed the communicational thinking in the 1970s and 1980s would greatly exceed the scope of this work, which provides an overview of some of the central references of that period.

### a) Critical Theory

According to the interdisciplinary program formulated by Max Horkheimer in 1931, the purpose of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt was to do a global analysis of society – from its economic infrastructure to its ideational bases. Due to a series of reasons and conflicts, the output of the Institute remained centered upon the field of culture and ideas, composing what can be identified as a triple criticism: the project of an advanced capitalist society, the culture of that society and positivist science.

Recalling the content of these criticisms, the complaint of the commodification of society and the ever-present profit motive stands out as a central feature, contaminating the culture and causing its degradation and subservience. In this context, culture finds itself reduced to ideology and inscribed in a logic of alienation; science bends and submits to the productivist and commercial objectives of the capitalist society. For Adorno, true culture cannot but be implicitly critical; the leaven of truth in culture is denial. Converted into *cultural assets*, tied to a system of commodification, culture denies its own *raison d'être*.

As Voirol (2011) emphasized, the term *cultural industry*, coined by Adorno and Horkheimer to name the culture submitted to mercantile logic, acquires a critical and provocative nature in German when it appears in the same word – *Kulturindustrie*, joining two terms that are totally opposed. Industry is usually associated with economy, rationality, planning and strategic interest; culture evokes creation, originality, autonomy and freedom. The term cultural industry constitutes, according to that author, an oxymoron and a concept of complaint: “Through an association of antithetical semantic universes, it aims at revealing what we do not see, namely the degradation of culture in modern capitalist society” (Voirol, 2011: 127). It is worth stating that Adorno exerted a strong influence on the development of Brazilian researchers in the 1970s and occupied a significant place in the academic output of that decade.

### b) The theory of hegemony

Gramsci's influence in Brazil was, meanwhile, stifled by the weight of the Frankfortian perspective; it arrives later, around the 1980s, through the

work of Latin American researchers and the first echoes of Cultural Studies. It is important, here, to call attention to the relational perspective that marks the Gramscian approach to culture through the “hegemonic culture – subaltern culture” binome (Lopes, 1990: 52). Culture, for the author, is a field of battles and negotiations; subaltern cultures neither result from the imposition of hegemonic culture, nor are they pure resistance. Culture cannot be reduced to a hegemonic whole, but is criss-crossed by ambiguities and contradictions; it contains trans-class elements and carries the marks of experience and history. Thus, a concrete analysis of cultural practices as well as their uses and transformations is important to Gramsci.

The concept of hegemony is central to Gramscian thinking and is of ultimate importance to communications studies. The concept comes from Lenin (related to the dictatorship of the proletariat). Used by Gramsci, it gains original development and comes to replace and, at times, to complement, the concept of domination. It is tied to the coercion exercised by a dominant class over the dominated groups, and comes with the idea of intellectual and moral direction: “every ‘hegemonic’ relationship is necessarily a pedagogic relationship” (Gramsci, 1974: 69). In this positive aspect of *direction*, the concept guides the analysis of power relationships between groups, classes, nations and, beyond the political-economic sphere, concerns the realm of ideas, beliefs and representations.

### c) P. Bourdieu’s theory of domination

Bourdieu’s theory had weak penetration in Brazil, in the area of communications studies (in contrast to its strong presence in the field of Education). It concerns, however, a sociology of culture based on relationships of class dominance that operates through the symbolic – thus, having strong incidence in the field of communications. Bourdieu, however, was not interested in the study of media<sup>2</sup> and he virulently criticised the *mass mediologists* that, through conceptual syncretism, were developing a fantastic sociology or mythology: neither sociology (by the lack of appropriate empirical references) nor pure theory (by the inability to deduce), “a mediated culture is a metaphysical one – in the Kantian sense – that functions poorly” (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1963: 1007, translation by the authors of this paper).

Since Bourdieu totally discredited the theories of media of his time, we can wonder why he did not propose how they should be studied. He also criticized the methodological mistake of this *mythology of the sociologists*, of dealing with the wrong object and sticking (succumbing) to the syntax of the prophetic discourse of the media. The central issue, this eminent sociologist pointed out,

2. One exception was a small book published by Bourdieu in 1996, *Sur la télévision*, followed by *L’emprise du journalisme*, which had little impact.

would not be found in the form or content of the mediated discourses, but in the system of symbolic domination, through a model of reproduction, of a generative type, “able to correlate the approach of these structures to that of practices through *habitus*” (Miceli, 1974: 39).

The power of words, for the author, is not in the words themselves but in the process that legitimates them, as well as in those who speak them<sup>3</sup>. Classes and class fractions are engaged in a symbolic battle to impose a definition of the world according to their own interests, to disseminate and legitimate a framework of ideological positions that reproduce the field of social positions in a transfigured form. Symbolic systems attain their political function as instruments of domination – to impose and legitimate it – acting as structured and structuring instruments of communication (Bourdieu, 1989: 11). It deals, therefore, with a struggle for control of the institutions that guarantee and perpetuate their symbolic power.

So, for Bourdieu, the study of media does not mean much in itself (its discourse is already known); the real issue – what media really is – is attained through the analysis of media ownership, of the system of production of symbolic representations.

#### **d) Reification and the emptying of the symbolic**

Although we do not deal, here, with an articulated theoretical framework, it is possible to group a heterogeneous set of authors who shared a pessimistic and strongly nihilistic outlook on the analysis of contemporary society. This society is marked by the logic of consumption, the overwhelming presence of the means of communication, the avalanche of information and the proliferation of images.

First, we recall Guy Debord and his concept of reference *The Society of the Spectacle*, first published in 1967 – preceding the libertarian discussion that erupted in the world in May 1968. Philosopher, social agitator, and one of the founders of Situationist International, Debord vilified capitalist society and the reign of the commodity as well as the banalization and emptying of life they caused:

The world at once present and absent, which the spectacle makes visible, is the world of the commodity dominating all that is lived. The world of the commodity is thus shown for what it is, because its movement is identical to the estrangement of men among themselves and in relation to their global product (Debord, 1997: 28, author’s emphasis).

3. “What gives power to words and slogans, power to maintain or subvert order, is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who pronounce them, *belief whose production does not derive from the word competency*” (Bourdieu, 1989: 15, our emphasis).

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4. “The society which carries the spectacle does not dominate the underdeveloped regions by its economic hegemony alone. It dominates them as the society of the spectacle” (Debord, 1997: 38, author’s emphasis).

The *society of the spectacle* was completely taken over by the commodity form, which is the contemporary form of domination<sup>4</sup>. In this society, “the agent of the spectacle is the opposite of the individual, renouncing all autonomous qualities”; “the star is the object of identification with the seemingly shallow life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived” (Ibid: 40).

Another great, nihilistic, critical thinker who, at the end of the 20th century, represented the tragic version of post-modern theory was J. Baudrillard. He announced (foretold) the impossibility of communication in the mediated era, the loss of meaning in the image society (images that say nothing, the extinction of the symbolic, diluted in the realm of simulation), the consummation of the subject in the society of consumption. For the author, “cultural consumption may thus be defined as the time and place of the caricatural resurrection, and of the parodic evocation of what no longer exists” (Baudrillard, 1970: 147). Recalling the famous phrase of McLuhan (*The medium is the message*), he adds: the true message of the media is not the manifest content of sounds and images that they convey but the constraining pattern linked to the very technical essence of those media, of the disarticulation of the real, into successive and equivalent signs, on the basis of the denial of things and of the real.

This, then, is the truth of mass *media*: it is their function to neutralize the lived, unique and eventual character of the world, and substitute for it a multiple universe of media which, as such, are homogenous one with another, signifying each other reciprocally and referring back and forth to each other. In the extreme case, they each become the content of the others – and that is *the totalitarian message of a consumer society*” (Ibid., 1972: 189, author’s emphasis).

5. Parodying Bourdieu, he says: “There is no theory of *media*. The *media revolution* remains thus far both empirical and mystical, as much in McLuhan as in those who challenge him” (Baudrillard, 1972: 209).

Disbelieving the contributions of the theories of communication<sup>5</sup> as well as the nature of the means of communication, he predicts that it is illusory to believe in another possibility of using the media. What characterizes the mass *media* is that “they are anti-mediatory, and intransitive. They fabricate non-communication” (Ibid.: 217, our emphasis).

### THE CRITIQUE OF CRITIQUE

From the very distinct epistemological matrices and theoretical foundations, those theories and authors come closer together through their critical biases and denouncing content. The criticism is directed at capitalism, at its logic of domination, at the commercial nature that rules not only the economic relations in the *strict sense* but which also permeates the set of social relationships and compromises the constitution of the subjects – their humanity, autonomy and

capacity for agency. Communication, communications technology, the media and media products are seen as instruments of domination, as alienating practices, ideological in their content and in the relationship they establish. On the horizon of these criticisms – however, remote and almost unattainable – is the search for an ideal of emancipation.

As already mentioned above, those theories and authors, which had huge repercussion and impact during the 1970s and 1980s, were gradually abandoned, criticised and some were nearly discredited. The Critical Theory and the Adornian perspective, especially in the area of communications studies, were strongly rejected.

This then raises the question: why this abandonment, if most of those theories were shown to be consistent, based on legitimate assumptions and articulated with solid arguments? What is the reason for the indifference with which they are remembered if their purposes – criticism of capitalism, denunciation of oppression, pursuit of social justice and the autonomy of subjects – are still, today, considered appropriate and necessary?

No theory is valid for eternity. Some are abandoned, supplanted by more complete theories, or proved to be misguided, or refuted by the facts. But, above all, it is important to remember that theories respond to issues and problems that are historically posited, within a certain context, given the particular circumstances. A change in reality changes the setting of reflection and the axis of inquiry. This is, therefore, one of the responses to the relative abandonment or ostracism of the theories discussed above. The world that enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not exactly the same as the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, after passing through the scrutiny of epistemological criticism and confronted by new thinking, those theories presented weaknesses and inconsistencies.

Domination and alienation are processes that cannot be understood empirically. They have to be unveiled from indicators and appear as researcher's analytical constructs. They are abstract processes, resulting from analytical syntheses. For some of those theories, there were questions about their abstraction and distance from reality (lack of empirical evidence) as well as about the weight that they give to illusion and to the notion of the unconscious. These syntheses were said to be flawed by their inability, or myopia, to read reality and interpret indicators (or even the lack thereof).

All those theories shared the same type of approach: they were totalizing theories that treated reality as a homogenous whole and paid little attention to differences and contradictions. This totalizing aspect raised a set of criticisms known and shared by all of us, researchers in the area:

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- the underestimation of the subjects, of their critical spirit and creative ability as well as their power of resistance;
- their monolithic tone, insensitive to differences; their inability to deal with singularities, to account for the unique;
- the simplification (when not the cancelation) of the potential of languages and of semiotic processes;
- the lack of attention to, and even the incomprehension of, the operative processes of different media and of their power of agency.

### NEW PERSPECTIVES

Seeking to overcome such weaknesses and inconsistencies, and instigated by new developments and new issues, the years 1990 and 2000 indicated a search for other theoretical and conceptual horizons. Such change is well expressed in the trajectory of a renowned French sociologist, L. Boltanski. He was a former student and disciple of Bourdieu, under whose guidance he worked for a long time. Boltanski, around the 1990s, distanced and positioned himself critically against Bourdieu's theory, proposing and developing a pragmatic sociology of critique, focused on the observation of actors' daily routine, their critical discourses, their consciousness regarding their own needs and choices.

Assuming more clearly a pragmatist perspective, to emphasize practice, he moves away from comprehensive readings to focus on actors in their work environments, seeking to describe their routines, situations of dispute, performance and discursive production. In his words,

To this end, it seemed to us to be necessary [to understand and describe the situated activity of the social actors] to bracket an unduly powerful explanatory system, whose mechanical utilization risked crushing the data (as if sociologists already knew in advance what they were going to discover) so as to observe, naively, as it were, what actors do, the way they interpret the intentions of others, the way they argue about their case, and so on.... To be brief, our move therefore consisted in re-tilting from a critical orientation to a search for a better description (...) (Boltanski, 2009: 46)

The movement pointed out by the author, for the sake of greater attention and sensitivity to data from reality, was therefore to abandon or replace the strong theoretical apparatus in search of a more descriptive approach of the object of study. The sociological *démarche* into which he ventures replaces the analysis of vertical relations by that of horizontal relations; it shifts the emphasis from structures to actors' attention – their actions and discourses.



A similar movement could also be observed in our field and in communications studies as such. The ideological analyses and the critique of cultural domination have been replaced by more specific and focused studies on the diversity and plurality of communicative practices, discourses and interventions of actors. The broader structural framework in which the means of communication are situated (and act) was left aside in order to focus on the communicative processes, their particularities, complexity, elements and dynamics.

In this movement, researchers' attention addressed several fronts: attention to the subject and to the processes of subjectivation; the organization of groups, networks and communities; the configuration of new media formats, media convergence and transmedia processes. Studies focused on the analysis of actors' performance and their struggle for success – and for 15 minutes of fame. Cultural Studies opened the doors for different types of uses of cultural products; they rescued the legitimacy of satisfaction and pleasure deriving from the consumption of trivial products; they highlighted identity struggles and processes.

New objects of study have been the focus of communication research in Brazil for the past 20 years: theoretical references have been introduced, and other concepts as well as a great diversity of authors have enriched and implemented the analysis. This change evidences the growing lack of interest for *strong* theoretical apparatus and for more comprehensive analyses.

At the moment, the culture perspective plays a central part in articulating knowledge in the communication field. The media culture, or culture of the media, has replaced the old *mass culture*, or *cultural industry* and topics such as cultural diversity, cultural pluralism are on the agenda. The concept of mediatic culture concerns the cultural panorama of contemporary society, marked by the centrality of the media, in which everyday experience and mediatic production are interpenetrated, creating a composite cultural picture, marked by tensions, clashes, mixes, reproductions and impositions<sup>6</sup>. The defining axis of this new concept is the scenario and operation of the media themselves: it reveals a process of duplication and reproduction of events and narratives across different media, a movement in which the world and the reality are shaped by new dynamics that have been called transmedia dynamics.

Furthermore, the expression *means of communication* has already fallen into disuse, and been replaced by the term media. The shift to the term media, beyond the technological issue (emergence and diversification of technological apparatuses) also expresses a broadening of understanding of its nature, its transformative potential. Media, thus, encompasses a broader meaning which includes technology, language and the shaping of relations (interaction model).

6. Lucia Santaella advocates the introduction (or creation) of the expression Media Culture in Brazil. She distinguishes it from the concept of mass culture. It refers to the culture resulting from mediatic convergence, from interactive media. "The fundamental feature of media culture is mobility, the transfer of information from one media to another, with only a few changes. The communication data do not tend to last long; however, they multiply their appearances as long as they do" (Santaella, 1996: 36).

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7 On the subject, see Agamben, 2009.

This new object includes so many things now that the term *media* became generic and the term *device* was aggregated to it. Media has to do with that set; when dealing with one means in particular, we look at it as a device. The analysis today (and despite the Foucauldian understanding of the concept of device<sup>7</sup>) becomes more descriptive-operational and seeks to study the distinctions and specificities of each means, its kind of language, forms of operation and shaping of a relationship (or sociability) model.

These concepts (media, media culture) are more sensitive and permeable to the analysis of the specificity of apparatuses and devices producing representations and symbolic goods, to the diversity of forms and speeches that circulate in this new universe, and to the plurality of scenarios and cultural circuits. There is not one single culture in the field of *media culture*. The analyses developed, however, do not take into consideration the relations between media products and power relations, media and the structure of society, and tend to circumscribe the cultural dynamics to the relationship between the different objects.

In this more contemporary configuration of our field of study, and along with the emergence of so many new concepts, the abandonment of some – such as ideology, class, domination – which were central decades earlier, is observed.

### PERSPECTIVES

The movement of theories is cyclical: critical phases fade away; critical thinking that is abandoned does return. What we see today are restless voices expressing the need for a more comprehensive view that takes into account both the dynamics of domination and the prospects for change.

The English philosopher T. Eagleton, in his irreverent style, draws attention to the disorganization of the cultural theory from the 1980s onwards. Having strayed from its original moment (founded on a critical approach of class difference and domination), it seeks to identify the continuation of the policy in other spaces and media. “The emancipation which had failed in the streets and factories could be acted out instead in erotic intensities or the floating signifier,” he mocks. New theories of discourse, deviance and desire become alternatives to a failed leftwing political ideology, says the author, bringing back what the traditional left had belittled: “art, pleasure, gender, power, sexuality, language, madness, desire, spirituality, family, body, the ecosystem, the unconscious, ethnicity, lifestyle, hegemony” (Ibid.: 52). What had been abandoned is recovered, and what had been prioritized, in a curious transformation (or distortion) is abandoned, including the reading of classics: for the successors of Cultural Studies, states Eagleton, “thinkers like Antonio Gramsci came to mean theories of subjectivity, rather than workers’ revolution” (Ibid.: 53).

In an essayistic style and without any academic formalism, the English thinker shows the various trends and paths offered by contemporary thought that result from the political failure of the projects of previous years. In the same perspective, the American philosopher R. Rorty (1998) criticizes the American cultural left for dissolving political action in the game of subjective differences, in a theoretical deviation which promotes the distancing and rejection of any form of effective participation in real changes in society. According to the author, this debate, apparently distant from the very issue being discussed here, is actually central to this reflection – and to what is unsettling in the development of new theories, including communications theories and research. Faced with the multifaceted framework of concerns guiding the work today and the choice of conceptual apparatus, and with the discussion of themes and references, something got lost along the way: the critique of inequality and of suffering in the world, as well as the ideal of a collective project.

Returning to Boltanski, it is very illustrative to indicate the latest twist in the French sociologist's trajectory. After having left Bourdieu's matrix and the strong explanatory device that represented his sociology in the 1990s (cf. previously mentioned), he revised again his theoretical-methodological research apparatus in order to recover part of the abandoned tradition.

Having brought together critical sociology and the pragmatic sociology of critique (Bourdieu's perspective and his own), Boltanski stresses the mutual dependency and complementarity that can be established between both, pointing out the limits (and risks) of the pragmatic sociology of critique (his) as it loses track of totality. It is, according to him, unable to go beyond the fragmented and private criticism of the actors and cannot be a global criticism of society<sup>8</sup>.

Without this notion (without an idea of the totality and of the social order that brings us together as a society) how is a project of the emancipation of individuals constructed or supported? Such a project cannot sustain itself in personal criticism and dissatisfaction because emancipation is not a process that is experienced individually, but the result of a project of society and of collective social dynamics.

To focus on the role of criticism in the theory, and to emphasize the importance of a critical theory, Boltanski develops and presents two pairs of concepts – *critique and metacritique*; simple exteriority and complex exteriority.

The criticism of individuals and social criticism set, for the author, two distinct concepts, which he calls *critique and metacritique*. The concept of *critique* refers to isolated criticisms, developed by individuals from their own experience, which is localized and specific. On the other hand, *metacritique* is a second degree criticism, which rests on individual criticisms, feeds on them

8. "The main criticism we have made of critical sociology is, briefly put, its overarching character and the distance at which it holds itself from the critical capacities developed by the actors in situations of everyday life. The pragmatic sociology of critique, by contrast, fully acknowledges actors' critical capacities and the creativity with which they engage in interpretation and situated action. But it seems difficult, pursuing this programme, to realize all the ambitions connected with a metacritical orientation. We therefore find ourselves confronted, on the side of the critical sociology, with a construct that paves the way for candidly critical possibilities, but furnishes itself with agents subjected to structures that escape them, and skip over the critical capacity of actors. We therefore find ourselves on the side of the pragmatic sociology of critique, with a sociology that is genuinely attentive to critical actions developed by actors, but whose own critical potentialities seem limited" (Boltanski, 2009: p. 43; translation into English: 2011).

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and gathers them, constituting and arising as a critique of the social order. It is, therefore, a theoretical construction and aims to unveil the oppression, exploitation and domination of a society or social groups.

Boltanski adds to these two concepts a new pair: *simple exteriority* and *complex exteriority*. To make a reading of reality (to seize it), it is necessary to place oneself outside of it, to reach an exteriority. The description of a reality (made by the researcher or by the ordinary individual) can only be done from an external point of view; it is what he calls *simple exteriority*. On the other hand, the *complex exteriority* is also an external movement of the reading of reality, which is based on simple exteriority; yet, it carries or adds a judgment of value about the social order – it summons a metacritique.

Descriptive sociology (the same one Boltanski was doing) lies on the level of a simple exteriority; it focuses on the critique of individuals, but does not intend to deal with the social order. It does not do metacritique, he claims. In a bold review of his own work, Boltanski wonders: what is the role of this sociology? Knowledge for knowledge? Wouldn't it have another aim, in addition to legitimizing itself as a field of knowledge?

We can ask ourselves the same thing regarding communication studies. The abandonment of broader theoretical references and critical theories was followed by specialized analyses, more detailed descriptive studies of devices, languages, hearings, ordinary subjects and unique subjectivities. What do we aim at by promoting this change? Moreover, what are the goals of our research? Why, and for what, do we do research (aside from feeding our curriculum vitae and increasing the bibliography in the area)? The quest for this knowledge of objects and practices of communication serves what purpose, and for whom?

Such inquiries aim to draw attention to the political dimension of our theoretical choices and to the responsibility of our interpretation – because they fall back on reality. Our production develops professionals and not only guides their actions as, through them and the natural process of diffusion of knowledge, it enhances their return to common sense. What kind of result and change does this knowledge that we produce, upon returning to the sphere of everyday life of society, lead to? As an interpretation of reality, and considering that we act in the world guided by shared interpretations, what kind of action and behavior does the knowledge of media disseminated by Brazilian researchers trigger in society?

Reinforcing the idea of this return, of this dynamic of mutual feeding that takes place between the production of knowledge about reality and the reality itself, it is worth retrieving another concept issue dealt with by Boltanski: the degree of reality of reality. Making a distinction between reality and world (the

reality as the choices one makes in a world that largely exceeds one's ability to act), he says "the reality suffers from a kind of intrinsic fragility such that *the reality of reality* must incessantly be reinforced to endure" (Boltanski, 2009: 65, our translation). This reinforcement is its degree of generalization – how much it is shared by many, for a community. The reality of some, of a few, does not impose itself forcefully as reality; it is its *rise in generality* (the development of exchanges and consensus around it) that strengthens it as a *collective reality*, which reinforces the sense of belonging and boosts the action of the subjects.

Well, what does this have to do with us, communication researchers, and how does this issue serve as a starting point for thinking about the rescue of critique in our current theoretical frameworks – without losing what they brought as openness and enrichment in the understanding of communicative processes?

As stated above, to nourish common sense, to participate in the selection process, the interpretation and generalization of reality, of what is *the reality of reality*, is a task of great responsibility. It is a result of our choices to generalize readings which state a reality experienced, or that go beyond it; that confirm or criticize it. Well, in this way it is possible to talk about the inadequacy of merely descriptive studies, which cannot or dare not go beyond the findings, as well as rescue the role of a science committed to change and improvement, focused on going beyond the existing, and capable of producing metacritique.

For us, communication researchers, more than collecting and observing the unique view of ordinary subjects and their possible contestatory discourses, as well as emphasizing the differences and speaking in plurality, isn't it our place also to unify these criticisms and contribute to the constitution of a critical discourse in society? From a new look on communicational reality – and through it, the reality as a whole?

This does not mean, obviously, returning to the *old* theories of domination (although it deals with recovering and keeping what they brought as revealing and insurmountable). It is not a question of defending this or that affiliation. It deals with (and this is the point which this reflection wants to reach) advocating a permanent critical view in communication studies; a perspective that, attentive to the specific and singular, does not limit itself to objects and self-reliant reasonings and can always insert these objects back into the larger context in which they exist, act, condition and are subject to conditionings.

P. Ricoeur, examining two phenomena which are fundamental to the existence of social life, two opposite sides and two complementary functions that typify the social and cultural imagination – ideology and utopia – highlights a common trait among them, which is the ambiguity: "they each have a positive

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and a negative side, a constructive and a destructive role, a constitutive and a pathological dimension” (Ricoeur, 1991: 66).

The ideology, he says, involves two antagonistic traits, which are distortion (cf. the Marxist conception of class domination) and integration (cf. the discussion of the symbolic action by Geertz). This trait of integration is necessary for the constitution of social life itself:

where there are human beings, there cannot already be a non-symbolic way of existence, and even less a sort of non-symbolic action. The action is immediately governed by cultural patterns that provide arrays for the organization of social and psychological processes, perhaps exactly like the genetic codes (...) they provide models for the organization of organic processes. (...) Our attention to the functioning of ideology at this extremely basic and symbolic level demonstrates the real constitutive role that ideology plays on social existence (Ibid: 83).

Therefore, the ideology is necessary and positive in its function of integration; it reaches a pathological level when it causes distortion to ensure the dominance of one group over another. Well, utopia also has its two sides: its downside is unreality, fragmentation, deviation; the positive side is to extend the exploration of the field of the possible:

Utopia introduces imaginative variations on the topics of society, power, government, and family. The kind of neutralization which constitutes the imagination as fiction is found in the action in the utopia. I propose that utopia, approached at this radical level as a function of nowhere in the constitution of social or symbolic action, is the counterpart of our first concept of ideology [as distortion]. We can say that there is no social integration without social subversion (Ibid.: 89).

Ricoeur’s suggestion – the relationship between ideology and utopia, the existence of its two sides – opens to us hints of how, in the analysis of media products (which are symbolic products), it is possible to perceive the integration/distortion tensions, unrealities/new possibilities. Our object of study is the raw material in which the work of ideology and utopia, in the construction of the cultural imagination and its incidence in the action of social subjects, takes place. It’s not our place, as communicators, to do extensive analyses of society; however, the critical reading that we’re capable of doing of the symbolic systems of cohesion and rupture, of crystallization and tensing of reality, puts us in a privileged place to understand our contemporaneity. Perhaps, to produce and generalize interpretations that promote actions towards the broadening of our horizons. **M**

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