

# A Political Economy of International Communications: Armand Mattelart's contribution to the world-system analysis of media

## *Uma economia política da comunicação internacional: a contribuição de Armand Mattelart para a análise do sistema-mundo das mídias*

PEDRO AGUIAR<sup>a</sup>

Universidade Federal Fluminense, Department of Communications. Niterói – RJ, Brazil

### ABSTRACT

This essay stems from the works of Armand Mattelart to envision a research program drawn to the critical and structural approach of international communication, in all its inequalities, asymmetries and relations of dependency. By reviewing the reflections of the Belgian thinker in his entry points to the theoretical-methodological proposition of Immanuel Wallerstein, the *world-systems analysis*, and by seeking to articulate both perspectives, especially in the former's notion of *world-communication* as the *world-system of communication*, the paper delineates an area of intersection between three theoretical schools: International Communication, International Political Economy and the Political Economy of Communication.

**Keywords:** Armand Mattelart, Immanuel Wallerstein, political economy of communication, international political economy, international communication

<sup>a</sup>Pedro Aguiar is a journalist and professor in the Department of Communications of the Fluminense Federal University (Universidade Federal Fluminense, IACS/UFF), where he lectures on journalism. He holds a doctorate in communications from Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ), as well as a master and post-graduate studies from the School of Communications at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (ECO/UFRJ). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8812-6545>. Email: [pedroaguiar@id.uff.br](mailto:pedroaguiar@id.uff.br)

### RESUMO

Este ensaio parte da obra de Armand Mattelart para vislumbrar um programa de pesquisa orientado para a abordagem crítica e estrutural da comunicação internacional nas suas desigualdades, assimetrias e relações de dependência. Com uma revisão das reflexões do pensador belga nos seus pontos de contato com a proposição teórico-metodológica da *análise dos sistemas-mundo*, de Immanuel Wallerstein, e buscando articular as duas perspectivas, especialmente na concepção de *comunicação-mundo* como *sistema-mundo da comunicação*, o trabalho delinea uma área de interseção entre três vertentes teóricas: a comunicação internacional, a economia política da comunicação e a economia política internacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Armand Mattelart, Immanuel Wallerstein, economia política da comunicação, economia política internacional, comunicação internacional

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v14i3p157-174>

V.14 - Nº 3 set./dez. 2020 São Paulo - Brasil PEDRO AGUIAR p. 157-174

MATRIZES

IN 2015, AT the opening conference of the 9th Congress of Latin Union for Political Economy of Information, Communication and Culture (Ulepicc) in Havana, Armand Mattelart recounted a story he experienced with his family. He was with his son Tristan, taking his grandchildren to school when he saw an image that stopped him in his tracks. There, in 21st-century Paris, after living through a coup and exile, and having witnessed the mutations in the geopolitical and technological context of the decades prior, the Belgian professor confronted the school's wall painted with Disney characters, including Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. Faced with his father's immobility, Tristan asked:

"What happened, dad?"

"Do you not see?" replied the author of *How to Read Donald Duck*.

"They won!"

The anecdote helps to synthesize both the general notion of Mattelart's work, largely produced with his wife Michèle – never distantly analytical, but engaged with and committed to social change – and the context in which we find ourselves today, and in which we can reread it. As a matter of fact, the omnipresence of multinational mass culture corporations like Disney is currently so intense that it would be scarcely imaginable in the 1970s. The digitization of nearly all productive and communicative processes allowed for a ubiquity and insidious control over everyday life. The idea of "networks" as a structure of horizontal and decentralized information flows concealed a dystopia in which fewer private capital organizations more directly access individual subjectivity and consumption potential. Capital *globalization* set off a *Westernization* of cultural production, even more pervasive in Global South societies.

These historic processes, which granted Communication centrality in contemporary society, were covered in Armand Mattelart's intellectual production, spanning over 50 years. Although an extensive and diverse oeuvre, his reflections have some overarching currents: the search for a systemic analysis of the history of communications, the constant political interpretation of the adoption of certain technological standards to the detriment of others, and finally, an in-depth history of ideas, enriched by the myriad of references that he holds. Far from being overblown, it provides a clear genealogy of notions, concepts, and theories, each one in its geographic and historic context, associated with specific interests. Altogether, it establishes a lifelong research program, which at many points gives continuity in communications to all-encompassing theoretical-methodological formulations, which this paper proceeds to analyze.

Developed from the reflections outlined in my doctoral thesis (Aguiar, 2018), this essay seeks to emphasize the intersections between Mattelart's work and the world-systems analysis proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974). We begin with a brief examination of the influences the concepts of world-economy and world-systems had on the Belgian thinker's writing. Then, we discuss how the different disciplines Mattelart mobilized to study international communications throughout his trajectory connect with Wallerstein's perspective. Finally, we seek to outline a research program in political economy of international communications, distinguishing Armand Mattelart's contributions to such an undertaking.

### BRAUDEL AND WALLERSTEIN IN MATTELART'S WORK

At many points in his books and essays, Mattelart mentions by name the conceptual framework of French historian Fernand Braudel (1902-1985), who preceded him by two generations in the French-speaking social sciences, as well as another exponent of critical thinking, more recent and his contemporary: the American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein (1930-2019), a heterodox Marxist.

At the beginning of the 20th century, as an exponent of the *Annales*<sup>1</sup> school, Braudel led the development of a new historiographic methodology based on the concept of *long-term history* (in French, *longue durée*), which revolutionized the hitherto dominant method. Against a historiography supported by ruptures and transformational episodes, the *Annales* historians favored perspectives on the permanent, continual and everyday aspects of life, paradoxically seeing in it the concreteness in which society's macrohistorical transformational processes materialized. They argued that only detailed examination for extended periods would allow researchers to achieve the distancing necessary to recognize social organizations' great determining structures.

Analyzing such history of the everyday elements that shaped the European bourgeoisie's civilizational project, Modernity, especially through commercial relations in the transition between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, Braudel's research confers protagonism to the dimension of *unequal exchanges*, a term he borrowed from the Greek economist Arghiri Emmanuel (1911-2001). Braudel developed objective methods to quantify the transfers of wealth from areas around Europe (Asia, the Middle East, North Africa) to the Renaissance

<sup>1</sup> Theoretical school of thought established by French historians around the academic journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch (1886-1944) and Lucien Febvre (1878-1956). Its main representatives, aside from the founders and Braudel, were Jacques Le Goff (1924-2014), Georges Duby (1919-1996), and Roger Chartier (1945).

mercantile capitals, especially Venice, Genoa, Florence, and Amsterdam. Later, the same methods would be applicable to the plundering of colonized countries by colonizer countries (Martins, 2011, p. 30), materialized in “spatial movements of resources, goods, and people” (Aguiar, 2018, p. 150). It is from this method that the *world-system* and *world-economy* concepts are derived, which Immanuel Wallerstein uses to describe “the articulated set of political and economic relations constructed by the bourgeoisie in Modernity, from its original center in Western Europe to spreading itself in a centripetal direction to colonized countries” (Aguiar, 2018, p. 150).

What we mean by a world-economy (Braudel’s *économie-monde*) is a large geographic zone within which there is a division of labor and hence significant internal exchange of basic or essential goods as well as flows of capital and labor. A defining feature of a world-economy is that it is not bounded by a unitary political structure. Rather, there are many political units inside the world-economy, loosely tied together in our modern world-system in an interstate system. And a world-economy contains many cultures and groups-practicing many religions, speaking many languages, differing in their everyday patterns. This does not mean that they do not evolve some common cultural patterns, what we shall be calling a geoculture. It does mean that neither political nor cultural homogeneity is to be expected or found in a world-economy. What unifies the structure most is the division of labor which is constituted within it. (Wallerstein, 2006, p. 23)

The American sought to expand Braudel’s conceptual construction beyond the economic aspect: the world-economy would be one of two types of *world-systems*, the other type being an *empire*. For Wallerstein, what both would have in common would be an “articulated configuration in scattered territories, yet integrated in mutually necessary and historically delimited exchange dynamics, with a beginning, peak, and an end” (Aguiar, 2018). The aspect of temporal delimitation is crucial to Wallerstein’s argument, given it so thoroughly rejects the supposed “eternity” championed for some systems as it, at the same time, requires historic causes for the emergence of each one of them. Thus, capitalism – which Wallerstein specifies as *historical capitalism* – constructs *capitalist civilization*, which he designates as the *modern world-system*.

Initially, it is important to emphasize a crucial distinction that is not a mere terminological triviality: just as Braudel’s concept of world-economy does not designate the global economy as a whole, but in fact an economy that is a *world in itself*, so too the world-system idea is not a system that necessarily

encompasses the whole world, but in fact that of a system which is in itself a world (Wallerstein, 1991, p. 192). That definition substantiates the translations of the term in Romance languages, which, according to the structure launched by Braudel with his world-economy (*économie-monde*), structures the second term not in an adjectival form (*mondial*, global in English), but indeed as a noun (*monde*, world in English). To temper expectations, it is also good to bear in mind that Wallerstein's world-systems analysis is not a research method, but rather a conceptual framework.

This concept of world-economy is defined by Fernand Braudel with basis in a triple reality: a given geographic space; the existence of a pole, "world core"; intermediary zones around this central node, and quite ample margins, which in the division of labor, are subject and dependent to the necessities of the core which dictates its laws. This relational schema has a name: unequal exchange. This exchange creates rising disparities between the core and periphery of the capitalist system, which makes Wallerstein, engaging with the *Annales* historian, affirm that it is a "creation of world inequality", only conceivable in a disproportionate, *universalist* space. (Mattelart, 1996, pp. 206-207)

In fact, as Mattelart observes, the *long term* is one of the starting points for Wallerstein to develop what became consolidated as *world-systems analysis*, a methodological proposition for social sciences that the American supported for nearly 50 years (from 1971 until his death in 2019). In that formulation, the perspective of totality – a premise of Marxist thought – demands space-time referentials that extrapolate countries as units of analysis. Thus, the proposal defends that relations *between countries*, preferably between vast regions of the planet such as continents, throughout centuries and not a few years, are more capable of offering responses to research inquiries in the social sciences.

Therefore, these economists come to defend that in modern capitalism, the unit of analysis ceases to be national society and comes to be the world-system, of which nations are only components. This thinking gives form to the first theoretical perspective in which the political economy of communications acts, cultural dependency, guided by world integration versus the unequal exchange of information and cultural products between nations. (Rêgo & Dourado, 2013, p. 8)

Originally a sociologist by training and having dedicated much of his trajectory to economic history, Wallerstein would devote his intellectual

efforts precisely to defend that the compartmentalization of the social and human disciplines does not make sense<sup>2</sup>. To this end, he gathers prior inputs from different sources to build a broader and more realistic method of studying historical processes. Since 1974, with the first volume of his trilogy on the capitalist world-system, Wallerstein proposed the bases of world-systems analysis (WSA)<sup>3</sup>, a tributary just as much to Braudel's *longue durée* as to the Marxist Dependency Theory (MDT)<sup>4</sup>, with which Armand Mattelart was in close contact in Europe and in Chile, during the Salvador Allende government (1970-1973).

Such a comprehensive method in time and space is reflected in Mattelart as a vision much convergent with the histories of the long term that he himself would build on international communications at a global scale (in *Communication-Monde*, 1992), the field of communications (*The Invention of Communication*, 1996[1994]), the bourgeois project to construct a global system of communication to boost accumulation of capital (*La Mondialisation de la Communication*, 1996), the notions of the world as a global community (*Histoire de l'Utopie Planétaire*, 2002[1999]), management of society as a machine (*Histoire de la Société de l'Information*, 2006[2001]) and the geopolitics of culture from the perspective of the Global South (*Diversité Culturelle et Mondialisation*, 2005).

As previously observed (Aguiar, 2018, p. 37), perhaps Mattelart's greatest merit is his astonishing capacity to trace the genealogy of certain topics, cataloging and linking authors and prior studies in mosaics of references and conceptual dialogues, greatly facilitating bibliographic revision. Under this long-term perspective, Mattelart shares the history of ideas, ideologies, and experiences that substantiated public policy, economic practices, and political actions from the dawn of Modernity to today in relation to international communication at a global scale.

In this effort, Mattelart references Braudel and Wallerstein on many occasions, such as to emphasize the coexistence of capitalism with other

<sup>2</sup> Wallerstein makes a case against the critique of compartmentalization of the social science disciplines, going back to the "divorce" between science and philosophy in Western Europe at the end of the 18th century – or in the words of Martins (2011, p. 23), the nomothetic and idiographic sciences. "The sciences denied the humanities the ability to discern truth" (2006, p. 3), he notes.

<sup>3</sup> The term *world-systems analysis* is frequently used alternately and as a synonym of *world-systems theory*. This latter term was rejected by Wallerstein himself, who alleged it to be "too early to theorize minimally seriously" (cited by Penaforte, 2011, p. 39)

<sup>4</sup> The main authors of the Marxist Theory of Dependency, which Mattelart nominally cites, were the Brazilians Ruy Mauro Marini, Vânia Bambirra, and Theotonio dos Santos, all exiled in Chile at the same time the Mattelart couple lived in the country.

modes of production (Mattelart, 1996, p. 221) and to subscribe to Wallerstein's critique of "segmented history" (Mattelart, 1996, p. 207), which certain bands of communications theorists adopted to defend standardized steps in the development of media.

Nowhere is that reference more evident than in the 1991 book *Mapping World Communication: War, Progress, Culture* (originally in French, *La Communication-Monde: Histoire des Idées et des Stratégies*), the title of which adapts Braudel's concept of world-economy. In it, for the first time, Mattelart accepts the ambitious goal of creating a long-term history of modern communications technologies and their political and ideological instrumentalizations. Following a Braudelian model of history, the Belgian author does not confine himself to a short period nor a limited space, but covers the world through at least 200 years of transformations, starting from the invention of the optical telegraph in 1792 by Claude Chappe.

From the very first page of *Mapping World Communication*, Mattelart paraphrases the French geographer Yves Lacoste in stating that "communication serves, first of all, to wage war" (Mattelart, 1994, p. 13)<sup>5</sup>. In fact, the topic of war in the media (and by the media) pervades the book and was fully evident at the time the book was being written. In 1991, CNN live broadcasts from the Gulf War made clear the strategy of selling the conflict to the public in a sanitized, sterilized, *gamified* way, in contrast with the rawness of the photos of those mutilated, mined, and disfigured by napalm in the Vietnam War (1963-1975).

The year 1991, when Mattelart published *Mapping World Communication*, was the year of preparing for the celebration and protest in the coming 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in America, when the historic meaning of colonization was debated and, for the first time, widely questioned. Since the year before, Wallerstein's thinking was in vogue – in debates, academic events, the press – based on the structural critique and American author's activism to the *protocapitalist* interpretation of the historical function of colonization<sup>6</sup>. In the same year, Wallerstein engaged in a public controversy with André Gunder Frank in European and American academic journals around the singular nature of capitalism as a historical system (which the former defended and the latter disputed) and the most appropriate formatting of the world-system idea. Gunder Frank affirmed there

<sup>5</sup> In 1976, Lacoste launched the book *La Géographie, ça Sert, d'Abord, à Faire la Guerre* ("Geography serves, first and foremost, to wage war"), as a form of provoking the positivist and utilitarian conception of the discipline.

<sup>6</sup> The same year, Wallerstein would participate in the foundation of the Modernity/Coloniality Group through debates and an essay produced with Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo (Ballestrin, 2003).

to be historically one world system (no hyphen), and, in line with Giovanni Arrighi and Samir Amin, argued that the current configuration presents continuity with relations of political power (empire) and commerce built up in the tricontinental (Europe, Asia, Africa) geographical *ecumene* dating back five thousand years. Wallerstein (1991, p. 190), on the contrary, noted that the structural logic of capitalism, rooted in the endless accumulation of capital, justifies its singularity as a world-system separately, and the author uses this to base his preference for the use of the term in the plural, world-systems. For Wallerstein (1991, p. 192), “The *modern world-system* (or the *capitalist world-economy*) is merely one system among many.” The peculiarity of this world-system, he argues, “is that it has shown itself strong enough to destroy all others contemporaneous to it.”

Thus, the term *world-communication* is admittedly inspired by Braudel’s world-economy, and “serves to continue the analysis of this new, hierarchical transnational space: the heavy network logic stamps its integrating dynamic at the same time as it produces new segregations, new exclusions, new disparities” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 2011, p. 170). In this conception, the units of analysis are globally expanded beyond national contexts, while the temporal dimension is extended to long-term histories. There, although Mattelart does not discuss at any moment what *world-communication as a concept* would be (he would only do this later, in 1995, in *Histoire des Théories de la Communication*, again co-authored with Michèle Mattelart), the dialogue with WSA’s all-encompassing concept is clear. In one of the rare moments in which Mattelart steps back to delimit the conceptual reach of the term world-communication, it is finally described as “a space affected by the deterritorializing logic of deregulation and globalization of the world-economy and, simultaneously, by the process of reterritorialization of unique places” (1994, p. 12)<sup>7</sup>. Thus, to cover international communications, the idea of world-communication does not take national systems as autonomous sets as its unit of analysis, but rather the systemic global totality in which they are placed.

### IPE, PEC, AND GLOBAL MEDIA STUDIES

Three theoretical trends or *traditions* developed alongside the reflections of the authors mentioned up to here. Firstly, International Political Economy (IPE)

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note the possible dialogue of this elaboration with Rogério Haesbaert’s (2016), in which he defends the simultaneous and inextricable process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, with special attention paid to the social formations articulated in networks.



is built just as much chronologically as in the degree of thematic amplitude. This transdisciplinary subfield owes much to references from economics, geography, geopolitics, and history, certainly, including to elaborations by liberal authors opposed to the critical Marxist tradition, such as Rostow and Schumpeter. Secondly, as a theoretical school within communications, born of intellectual heterogeneity, the Political Economy of Communications (PEC) deals with the exercise of power through the communication industry. International communications, which arose directly influenced by geopolitics as an applied discipline, concentrates on communicational dynamics and relations between different countries and societies.

The Braudelian perspective of long-term history had a special impact on the studies of political economy, which, since Smith and the physiocrats, were supported by large-scale comparisons to demonstrate structuring processes of national economies. Meanwhile, the main innovation of the *Annales* method was to expand the scale of analysis to the global level: just as not years and decades, but centuries and millennia were counted for the time axis. For the spatial axis, regions and countries no longer sufficed, rather continents and the planet. The nation state as a unit of analysis could not suffice given its systemic insertion in an articulated set of global economic relations. Employing the Braudelian perspective, political economy unfolded into IPE, whose research subjects extrapolated the initial nucleus of capitalism, concentrated in the North Atlantic, and came to comprise all areas of the world reached by bourgeois economic activity (mercantile, industrial, and capitalist) as key parts of the same system. Braudel, Wallerstein, and previously cited theorists of dependency are among the main references of IPE, together with authors of such distinct epistemological inclinations as Nikolai Kondratiev, Joseph Schumpeter, Walt Rostow, Paul Sweezy, Paul Baran, and the “*cepalinos*” Celso Furtado and Raúl Prebisch – from whom Wallerstein got the *core-periphery structure* concept adopted in WSA.

Another point in common in Wallerstein and Mattelart’s approaches is the critique of the paradigm of modernization. For developmentalists, modernizing a society would be “not only industrializing and promoting an increase in productivity, but matching it entirely to the North Atlantic model implanted by the bourgeois class and conceived by its organic intellectuals” (Aguiar, 2018, p. 171). Mass media and circulation of information gained a pivotal role in this effort.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the diffusionist perspective was born from this notion among international communications theorists, especially North Americans, by which the process of technological innovation would be spread

from richer countries to poorer ones, entailing “spontaneous” structural transformations in societies, replicating the consequences of the European and North American Industrial Revolution in the remaining regions of the world (Aguiar, 2018, p. 171). Such a proposition lacked consideration for the objective local historical conditions and, conveniently, nullified the concrete components of colonialism and imperialism from their variables, which underpinned the industrialization of Europe and North America. Finally, as Mattelart (1996, p. 213) highlights, “relations of subjection with outside rule will be incorporated in the very outlines of the national networks of communication in peripheral zones.”

Extroversion will be the rule. The case of colonial territories where railroads and the telegraph are fundamentally implanted according to the ‘point of entry’ model undoubtedly represents an extreme schema. The military need for the transport of troops was present in the origin of many rail networks. . . . The necessity to establish connections between ports and mines and other deposits of raw materials did the rest, generally depriving those regions of transversal communications, often isolating them from their close neighbors, when the latter were feudalized to rival empires. (Mattelart, 1996, p. 213)

Drawing directly from Wallerstein, Mattelart observes that the modern world-system’s centripetal structure (running toward the core) is precisely the same which orients the design of communications infrastructure, just as much telecommunications (from 19th century telegraph cables to digital networks) as the circulation of information, especially transnational news agencies’ flow systems.

When we come back to draw out the commercial networks on a map, we become aware that they have a fairly clear centripetal configuration. Their starting points are different, but all of the end points are oriented to a small number of regions. Today we could say that they have a tendency to move from the periphery to the core, or “heart”, of the world-economy . . . Using the term “commercial networks” or “branches”, we designate an extensive form of social division of labor, which, from the development of historical capitalism, became ever more extensive from the double geographical and functional point of view, at the same time as it consolidated its hierarchical content. This hierarchization of space copied onto the structure of productive processes drove an ever-greater polarization between central and peripheral zones of the world-economy, not only at the level of wealth distribution (real levels of compensation, quality of life, etc.),

but also and especially at the level of the dynamic of capital accumulation itself. (Wallerstein, cited by Mattelart, 1994, p. 207)

The classical liberal diffusionist tendency clearly argued that the development process would be spread from the cores of the world-system to the periphery, demanding importation not only of infrastructure, but also superstructure: values, ideologies, production and power relations. In the words of their main proponent, Everett Rogers (cited by Mattelart, 1994), development is

a type of *social change* in which *new ideas* are introduced into a social system with the objective of producing an increase in production per capita and the elevation of living standards through more modern production methods and a perfected social organization. (p 185)

Consequently, as previously noted (Aguiar, 2018, p. 171), diffusionists placed communications – as a discipline and economic sector – in the center of the transformational dynamics of a society, as Mattelart emphasizes (1994, pp. 170-177; 2002, pp. 336-337; 1986/2004, pp. 230-231). This uncritical paradigm saw the reproduction of techniques, processes, and values of the core in peripheral nations as *natural*, without taking into account the particularities and priorities of the latter, as Mattelart critiques:

Future receptacles of a progress originating abroad, the so-called traditional societies, were reduced to waiting for the revelation of the *dei ex machina* charged with spreading the good cosmopolitan word. Mirror and screen: development-modernization incited those societies, on the one hand, to see the image of their future through the ideal model incarnated in the modern societies of the urban and industrial North, and, on the other, to consider their very own cultural heritage as a disadvantage in the sense of social and economic evolution. (Mattelart, 1994, pp. 201-202)

Diffusionism appeared, at first glance, to be confirmed by the geohistorical trajectories of the expansion of telecommunication technologies and means of communication, all begun in the core of the capitalist world-system, and from there, disseminated to the peripheries in concentric and centrifugal waves, along the same lines described by Prebisch and Wallerstein. Meanwhile, the diffusion would inherently bring the deepening of dependency, since control over technology – in production, reproduction, maintenance, and initial training for use – remained in the hands of capital headquartered

in the core. Without technological transfer, the simple installation of equipment in peripheral territories did not allow them the autonomy for its technological incorporation in their economic structures, including in communications. On the contrary: it made them further dependent on equipment providers, replacement parts, supplies, fixes, and maintenance, as well as the professionals trained to operate them. It is perfectly legitimate to question whether that dynamic changed substantively with the process of digitization of communication and the economy.

The critiques against the diffusion model globally rebuke its alleged neutrality and the three premises that legitimate it: [that] communication engenders development of its own right; growth of production and consumption of goods and services constitutes the essence of development and results in a just distribution of compensation and opportunities; the key to the increase of productivity is technological innovation, without seeking to know who takes advantage of or is disadvantaged by it. (Mattelart, 1994, pp. 185-186)<sup>8</sup>

Reviewing the book *Mapping World Communication* some years after its release, Beaud & Kaufmann (1998, p. 8) observe that it is precisely from the perspective of global analysis and the long term that Mattelart is able to reconstitute the direct lineage between the study of information in the military context and the theoretical doctrines of communication adopted by multilateralism in peacetime.

As an allusion to the concept of world economy which Immanuel Wallerstein developed in the tradition of Fernand Braudel's ideas, the title of Mattelart's book clearly defines his intention: to recount the history of the globalisation of networks and information flows, and their political, economic and cultural implications. In this history war occupied a key position, particularly the Second World War. According to Mattelart, it served as a laboratory for propaganda and psychological action on a global scale, the theoreticians of which, and primarily North American academics, were subsequently to exert a huge influence, notably in international organisations such as Unesco. (Beaud & Kaufmann, 1998, p. 9)

Between 1962 and 1974, according to Mattelart himself (2002, pp. 334-335), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco)

<sup>8</sup> This critique by Mattelart is based in the arguments previously raised by Luis Ramiro Beltrán in "Premisas, Objetos y Métodos Foráneos en la Investigación sobre Comunicación en América Latina" in 1976, published as a chapter of the book *Sociología de la Comunicación de Masas*, edited by Miguel de Moragas.

happily embraced developmentalist ideology, which was turned into the parameter of projects supported or financed by the organization. In fact, established names in research in international communications, like Wilbur Schramm, Ithiel de Sola Pool, and Jacques Kayser, were Unesco consultants in the 1950s and 1960s after having worked for their governments during wartime. The ideology of *communications for development*, sustained by the United States, gained traction within Unesco and oriented management of economic media environments favorable to business and the content produced by news agencies and large media companies in the US and Western Europe.

If, with the world-systems analysis, Wallerstein had already aligned himself with dependency theorists, critics of the *take-off* mythology, *catching-up*, and never-achieved development, Mattelart did the same in demonstrating that Schramm and his colleagues' predictions were more normative and wishful thinking than properly empirical. Diffusionism, therefore, was in line with developmentalist *catching-up*. In practice, diffusionists built a developmentalist approach to the field of communication. In the same manner as Rostow's perspective of stages of growth, their scale of analysis was linear and exclusively temporal. The prescription administered to peripheral countries was to repeat the path of core countries: strengthen private initiative, always adopt the latest technology available (provided by transnational companies) at wide scale, and minimize regulatory restrictions. In the same way, the diffusionist explanation took the attainment of liberal democracy as teleological, in which a high degree of media development would inevitably be a component of a representative political structure and a free market economy. Not by chance, the Belgian author gave revelatory importance to the fourth point of re-elected United States President Harry Truman's inaugural speech in 1949, in which he proffered four points that should guide his second mandate. *Point IV*, as Mattelart calls it on various occasions, was precisely the one that advocated development in *underdeveloped* countries (the first time the term was used in this sense) in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – precisely those which had been subject to European colonization in the Modern Age and imperialism in the Industrial Era. Thus, in a single move, the concepts of development and underdevelopment triumph, the latter of which, Mattelart (2004, p. 230) comments, was a “political act, in the strict sense of the term”. Since then, the ideology of development replaced the positivist notion of *progress* and was incorporated into the paradigm of modernization (Mattelart, 2002, p. 336).

Mattelart's critique of the idea of modernization also borrowed the critique of the periodized conception of time from Braudel, facetiously

treated as “history in slices” (Mattelart, 2002, p. 87). The Belgian author (1996, p. 221) agrees with Braudel and Wallerstein’s understanding that different modes of production coexist. By contrast, in the same tradition of the mathematical theory of communication (by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver), Daniel Bell’s idea of *post-industrial society* is set as just another phase in the stages of development of communication elaborated by diffusionists and inspired by the liberal (and anti-communist) economist Walt Rostow’s *stagism*. “Progress would come to backward countries through a diffusion of values from the so-called adult countries,” he mockingly explains (Mattelart, 2002, p. 88). This interpretive scheme is what modernization sociology, according to Mattelart, would call not globalization, but *Westernization*<sup>9</sup>.

Later, in the 1970s, a new generation of researchers published a primordial *corpus* of descriptive, detailed, and critical studies on the practice of major communication companies in core states on the structuring of the *international system of communication*, or world-system of communication, or world-communication, as Mattelart proposed to call it. Denouncing this world-system molded by the colonial-imperialist order, researchers and statesmen of the time launched a campaign to reform that order, requesting that a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) be established. Engaged in the campaign, that generation ended up articulating another theoretical branch: the Political Economy of Communications (PEC). Among its pioneers were the Finn Kaarle Nordenstreng, the Canadians Herbert Schiller and Dallas Smythe, the American Jeremy Tunstall, and Armand Mattelart himself.

After the euphoria of NWICO, buried once and for all by the MacBride Report (1980), studies on media dynamics and information between countries continued no longer as international communications, but with the anglicized name of *global media studies*. The critical and systemic perspective was abandoned in favor of specific and supposedly pragmatic studies on the function of media in countries outside of the core axis (that is, the US, Western Europe, and Japan). The change of tone pointed in the direction that Mattelart (1994, pp. 217-218) and Thussu (2006, p. 37) observed as a redemption of the free flow doctrine, now convenient to the spreading neoliberal thought. “The liberalization of the flows of information is at the very base of the new way of organizing the *network company*” (Mattelart,

<sup>9</sup> Another author from the same field, Daniel Lerner, acknowledged that modernization was a synonym of “Westernization” (Mattelart, 2002, p. 337), which qualified as positive, without allowing us to know if it was haughtiness, confession, or a Freudian slip.

1994, pp. 217-218). With growing digitalization of economic activities, many of the practices became convertible into *information*, especially in the financial and service sectors, and thus debates on flows of information were incorporated into commercial negotiations under the aegis of the World Trade Organization (WTO), responsible for promoting commercial liberalization and the consequent *mercantilization of everything*, in Wallerstein's terms.

### CONCLUSION: WHAT WOULD A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS BE?

The techno-politico-socioeconomic moment that we live in is a deepening of the dynamics described by the world-systems analysis. Recent digital convergence mixed the sectors of telecommunications, computing (now information technology), and mass communications in a wide and diverse *media* sector. What discipline is capable of accounting for the contradictions expressed in such amalgamation on its own? Which theoretical areas, for example, deal with transnational news agencies? Constituted as global actors in the world-system of communication, they escape all approaches that depend on eminently national referentials, such as regulation and public communications policies. What lines of study on current media structures can be simultaneously empirically precise and critical, ample in scale of analysis and engaged with the transformation of reality?

Armand Mattelart's lifelong oeuvre points to the necessity of a Political Economy of International Communications (PEIC), which at least up to now, does not exist as a subfield of organic and articulated studies. It is true that McChesney & Schiller (2003) have used the term before, but perhaps they have not given it the same breadth and theoretical and methodological purpose. Certainly, their concerns were focused on the factors of property and media regulation, which is a permanent feature of the PEC even today.

What is proposed here, however, goes further. It entails adding a theoretical and methodological lineage that already exists in other disciplines to Mattelart's contributions, consciously eliminating their boundaries. History, geography, geopolitics, and other social and human sciences have many conceptual resources to offer to the study of transnational media, from news agencies and international regulation of communications, among other topics that a PEIC could cover.

Wallerstein refused to frame the reality of peripheral countries in allegedly universal meta schemas and always sought to take the holistic space-time framework as a reference. Similarly, Mattelart also freed himself from the

limitations of comparative systematics, heir to a positivist lineage in the social sciences, and was able to build a critical and holistic perspective to examine the long-term history of international communication. Following Braudel's steps in the study of Mediterranean commerce in the 14th century, "this economy of immaterial flows," that is, of information and culture, "in the memory of its material origins," of tangible goods and commodities, must be recovered (Mattelart & Mattelart, 2011, p. 170). Colonialism is inextricable from world-communication. What world-systems analysis always argued was, broadly, that the economy of colonial America did not precede capitalism as arisen exclusively in Europe, but constituted the genesis of capitalism itself through the plundering of the continent which sustained the Marxist idea of *primitive accumulation* of capital.

Thus, a PEIC should receive contributions from the PEC and IPE, on the one hand, and reject the uncritical legacy of global media studies, which reverted to the stage of *administrative research* from the early 20th century.

Most evidently, what WSA offers to communications is the articulation between the core and peripheral sphere(s). Not by chance, the cores of the capitalist world-system are the same cores of world-communication, nominally the countries that house the most powerful and valuable media, information technology, and telecommunications companies. Given the number and diversity of ramifications, subsidiaries, participations, investments, and interests those companies maintain in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, any socioeconomic analysis that limits itself to the handful of nation states in which they act is rendered vain. The ties between investments, shareholding interests, and intercorporate partnerships among those companies, and between them and governments, confirm that a national framing will rarely account for a complex reality.

The idea of world-communication is a fundamental contribution precisely to designate this type of system. It seeks, finally, to circumscribe within this common zone – a PEIC – the potential subjects and problems of research to examine the entirety of global communication in its historical dimension, which owes so much to Armand Mattelart's lifelong efforts. ■

## REFERENCES

- Aguiar, P. (2018). *Agências de notícias do Sul Global: Jornalismo, Estado e circulação da informação nas periferias do capital* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro.



- Ballestrin, L. (2013). América Latina e o giro decolonial. *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política*, (11), 89-117. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-33522013000200004>
- Beaud, P., & Kaufmann, L. (1998). New trends in French communication research. *Javnost: The Public*, 5(1), 5-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.1998.11008665>
- Beltrán, L. R. (1985). Premisas, objetos y métodos foráneos en la investigación sobre comunicación en América Latina. In M. Moragas (Ed.), *Sociología de la comunicación de masas* (pp. 94-119). Gustavo Gilli. (Original work published in 1976)
- Haesbaert, R. (2016). *O mito da desterritorialização: Do “fim dos territórios” à multiterritorialidade*. Bertrand Brasil.
- Martins, C. E. (2011). *Globalização, dependência e neoliberalismo na América Latina*. Boitempo.
- Mattelart, A. (1994). *Comunicação-mundo: História das ideias e das estratégias*. Vozes. (Original work published 1991)
- Mattelart, A. (1996). *A invenção da comunicação*. Instituto Piaget. (Original work published 1994)
- Mattelart, A. (2000). *A globalização da comunicação*. Edusc. (Original work published 1996)
- Mattelart, A. (2002). *História da utopia planetária: Da cidade profética à sociedade global*. Sulina. (Original work published 1999)
- Mattelart, A. (2005). *Diversidade cultural e mundialização*. Parábola.
- Mattelart, A. (2006). *História da sociedade da informação* (2nd ed.). Loyola. (Original work published 2001)
- Mattelart, A., & Dorfman, A. (1977). *Para ler o Pato Donald: Comunicação de massa e colonialismo*. Paz e Terra. (Original work published 1971)
- Mattelart, A., & Mattelart, M. (2004). *Pensar as mídias*. Loyola. (Original work published 1986)
- Mattelart, A., & Mattelart, M. (2011). *História das teorias da comunicação*. Loyola. (Original work published 1995)
- McChesney, R., & Schiller, D. (2003). *The Political Economy of International Communications: Foundations for the emerging global debate about media ownership and regulation*. UNRISD.
- Penaforte, C. (2011). *Análise dos sistemas-mundo: Uma pequena introdução ao pensamento de Immanuel Wallerstein*. Cenegri.
- Rêgo, I. N. B., & Dourado, J. L. (2013, June 12-14). Economia política da comunicação e uma reflexão teórica sobre a mídia nas sociedades capitalistas [Presented article]. XIV Congresso de Ciências da Comunicação na Região Nordeste, Mossoró, RN, Brasil. <https://bit.ly/39StxY3>

- Thussu, D. (2006). *International Communication: Continuity and change*. Hodder.
- Wallerstein, I. (1974). *The modern world-system: Vol. 1. Capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world-economy in the 16th century*. Academic Press.
- Wallerstein, I. (1991). World system versus world-systems: A critique. *Critique of Anthropology*, 11(2), 189-194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X9101100207>
- Wallerstein, I. (2006). *World-systems analysis: An introduction*. Duke University Press.

---

Article received on October, 1st and approved on December, 7th, 2020.