

# Brazilian testimonies remembering Jesús Martín-Barbero

## *Testemunhos brasileiros que fazem memória de Jesús Martín-Barbero*

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**I**N BRAZIL, NOT only the work of Jesús Martín-Barbero exerted a notable influence on communication research, but his person also left indelible impressions, as well as friendship ties and affinities for the most diverse universities, spread across the country, where he exerted, in his numerous visits, his role as a regular speaker and also as an attentive listener to questions and doubts. To honor him, **MATRIZES** invited researchers – very few among his countless Brazilian correspondents – to relay their memories of the intellectual and affective relationship they kept with this unique figure. Our intent was to do justice to the idea that practicing a memory means remembering intersubjectively, assuming the role of remembering witness – a role Martín-Barbero embodied in many occasions. One of them is the English version of “Lo que la Investigación Latinoamericana de Comunicación Debe al Brasil: Relato Personal de una Experiencia Intercultural” (“What the Latin American Research on What Latin American Communication Research Owes to Brazil: Personal Account of an Intercultural Experience: An Intercultural Experience’s Personal Report”) (1999/2021), published in this issue of **MATRIZES**.

Remembering how the work of Brazilian intellectuals seduced him and impacted his research program, which proposed thinking *communication from culture*, he offered us a vast list of scholars who, more than critically analyze means of communication, tried to “think of Brazil: its complex formation as a country, its dense and conflicting cultural and political miscegenation” (Martín-Barbero, 1999/2021, p. 130). Thus our invitation to two of them, Muniz Sodré (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ) and Renato Ortiz (Universidade de Campinas – Unicamp), to, each in his own fashion, activate their memory and retrace their intellectual discovery and befriending of Martín-Barbero.

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However, twenty years after that narration by Martín-Barbero about the marks of Brazilian thought in Latin American communication research, we deem it essential to take on an update approach, extending the invitation to other scholars who had their research trajectories affected, above all, by his work. Given the limited available space, we solicited testimonies from Nilda Jacks (UFRGS) and Simone Maria Rocha (UFMG). The remembrance from these different generations do historicize our tribute to Jesús Martín-Barbero, updating and rendering visible the different aspects of his work's power, keeping the memory of his absence alive.

## A VOICE OF INNOVATION

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In one of the verses in *Faust* (in the scene “Vor dem Tor”), Goethe assures us that “everywhere form in development moveth”. I feel the strong temptation to paraphrase it under Jesús’ idiomatic eye: “within the people form in development moveth”.

Decades ago, before meeting him, he had urged me, in writing, to free myself from my “habit for the apocalyptic” (Martín-Barbero, 1987). A fair and humorous criticism. He referred to the speech monopoly hypothesis, in which I pushed my suspicion of television being a Goethean *witch kitchen*, detrimental to freedom of speech and cultural creativity.

Having the Frankfurt School as theoretical reference, I feared that electronic communication would neutralize the dialogic, sensitive dimension of common life. Mass manipulation would be feasible even without a visible manipulator.

But there was also, of course, the thought of communication as a dynamic system, open to mutual influence games among its constitutive elements. Jesús Martín shared this view, electing the receptive masses a *people* fit for cultural mediation. Between media and mediations lied a political space for social response.

Implied therein is a shift from European and North American theories to the current Latin American situation, allowing studies and methodological outlines to pin cultural diversity against the hegemony of circulating models.

This may also be called *social counter-movements*. Within this opening, communication approaches the Greek concept of *pharmakon*, both *poison* and *cure*. In other words, that which poisons the classic corporeity of institutions

renders, at the same time, *productive* possibilities regarding other forms of social action.

We, thus, glimpse “form in development moving”.

Jesús Martín-Barbero followed this path in his several decades of lucid and thought-provoking analyzes of culture, education and communication in Latin America. Many of his epigones produced valuable studies (both theoretical and applied) on the relation between the masses and the world of communication.

Last time we meet, I was in Bogotá for a week of lectures on communication and culture at the Universidad Javeriana. Although ill, he generously attended the lecture to partake in a discussion table. I am convinced that the Latin American theory of communication owes him a great deal.

## MIS AMIGOS LATINOAMERICANOS

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I met Jesús Martín-Barbero on February 6, 1987. The exact date – found in one of my notebooks – written with a fountain pen, records dinner at the Opera restaurant in Mexico City, at Néstor García-Canclini’s invitation. I had arrived from New York and had plans, after visiting Mexico, of going to Cuba, in search of the origins of the radio soap opera. At the time, I was working on a paper on Brazilian television soap operas, and Néstor had invited me for a course at the Escuela de Antropologia. Perhaps it was the subject that brought us closer together, since the electronic *feuilleton* bedazzled him so. We were to become both friends and accomplices. I saw him again the following year (1988) and throughout Latin America (Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Antigua, Cartagena, Havana), Spain (Almagro, Madri, Barcelona, Sevilha), and France (Paris); I fail to remember ever seeing him in the US. Jesús Martín evokes these trips within me, for a journey is a strong metaphor for intellectual work, and he was a traveler in the full sense of the word, who did not belong *anywhere*; a Spaniard turned Colombian, inhabiting a slit of this fractured territory. I think he appreciated that that stranger’s dimension (in Simmel’s sense of the word) had allowed him to see the world differently. His wit would nestle in this contradictory and fertile condition. His dissatisfaction with the world and its ideas always drew my attention. He could stand neither Francoism nor Latin American populism; and would invest with the same strength – perhaps “objection” is the right word – against established truths, theories, concepts,



and notions. I recall: non-conformity is a powerful thought driver, and Jesús Martín knew how to cultivate its potential.

What drew us closer amidst our differences? Certainly, a confluence of factors. The starting point was via communication media and cultural industries. He connected me to a whole Latin American network of communication studies. Congresses at the Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Facultades de Comunicación (FELAFACS) introduced me to an unfamiliar world I knew only through books. I had lectured on Urban Anthropology and Religion in Latin America at the Université de Louvain and some of my texts were, thereafter, translated into Spanish (the first of them published in *Dia-Logos de la Comunicación*, edited by FELAFACS). The continent's doors were opening up to me, introducing me to a circle of people I affectionately dubbed *mis amigos latinoamericanos* (Néstor García-Canclini, Aníbal Ford, Germán Rey, Rossana Reguillo, Carlos Altamirano, and many others). Two things brought us together; by that, I do not mean only research themes and subjects; ours was a form of tacit commitment, a common complicit ground. That fact would come up repeatedly, though spontaneously, in our conversations, as if beyond any conscious act. Against an entire Latin American intellectual tradition, we *distrusted* the category of nation. It seemed incapable of grasping Latin America's reality and the contemporary world. We departed, thus, from the acclaimed canon: the debate on the national identity. We ached for a look beyond its borders. But we had yet another *elective affinity*. The term (I clearly remember) applied to differences converging to a single direction: it was possible to think creatively and fruitfully regardless of the *metropolis'* theoretical demands. For Jesús Martín, intelligent life was not a prerogative stemming from Eurocentric or Americancentric domination of various disciplines' conceptual debates. In this sense, he was always a restless cosmopolitan in the *periferia*.

### JESÚS MARTÍN-BARBERO AND MY ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

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I first heard of Jesús Martín-Barbero in 1985: at the Brazilian Society for the Interdisciplinary Studies in Communication's (INTERCOM) VIII Ciclo de

Estudos Interdisciplinares em Comunicação (VIII Cycle of Interdisciplinary Studies in Communication) and in the course “Sociedade, Cultura e Comunicação no Brasil (1979-1985)” (Society, Culture and Communication in Brazil 1979-1985), ministered by Anamaria Fadul at the Escola de Comunicações e Artes at the Universidade de São Paulo (ECA/USP).

His proposal of thinking communication in cultural terms breathed life into my dissertation, *Mídia Nativa. Indústria Cultural e Cultura Regional* (Jacks, 1998), defended in 1987, in which I analyze advertising in the state of Rio Grande do Sul in the wake of the Nativist Movement. He is even more influential in my *Querência: Cultura Regional como Mediação Simbólica. Um estudo de recepção* (Jacks, 1999) – defended five years later. In this case, his discussion about the importance of receptors and mediations was fundamental to build the object of study and the methodological procedures for an empirical research on the relationship between families from Rio Grande do Sul and a soap opera from TV Globo.

These studies cemented my academic background, and rooted him firmly in my theoretical horizon; even after I discovered other authors.

One of the articles I published – “Repensando a Pesquisa em Comunicação” (Jacks, 1997) – was my attempt at overviewing what I considered at the time to be the strong points of his theoretical proposal. I found out, over time, that his work was far too extensive and complex for such gall.

I had the privilege, in 2006, of enrolling in a postdoctoral internship under his tutelage at the Universidade Javeriana, in Bogotá, in which I researched for the book *Meios e Audiências. A Emergência dos Estudos de Recepção no Brasil* (Jacks, 2008), whose preface featured him as a gateway to understanding Brazilian audiences.

He participated, in 2011, in the *Análisis de Recepción en América Latina: Un Recuento Histórico con Perspectivas al Futuro* (Jacks, 2011), presenting a research agenda.

The highlight of this long relationship was in 2017, when in his office in Bogotá, he told me that, if there were ever a country in which he would have liked to see the translation of *Memoria y Promesa. Conversaciones con Jesús Martín-Barbero* (Huergo & Morawicki, 2016, published in Argentina), that country was Brazil. I shared that mission with Ana Carolina Escosteguy and Veneza Mayora!<sup>1</sup>

I had the honor of giving him the book’s published translation (Huergo & Morawicki, 2018). He was static. That was the last time I met him!

<sup>1</sup>The books cited since 2006 are co-authored.



## MARTÍN-BARBERO: SOWER OF QUESTIONS

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Jesús Martín-Barbero and his work, especially the masterful *Communication, Culture, and Hegemony: From Media to Mediations* (Martín-Barbero, 1987), are regarded as a watershed in communication studies in Latin America. For he was, first and foremost, a sower of questions. For him, one needed to question what was obvious, what was known; to develop myopia to see better, to discover a new way of seeing. This intellectual disquiet led him, through an epistemological and hermeneutical cartography, to remap his starting points; to essentially, *relocate* questions.

Two dimensions of his nightly maps draw my attention: the mediation of temporality and the cultural matrix of orality. During the first decades of his work, Jesús managed to avoid the *evil eye* that intellectuals used to cast at television, to see, through it, the country in the relation the urban *populus* kept with melodrama. He thus managed to explore Colombia, Latin America and our sentimental geography differently, and preoccupy himself, from this standpoint, with how we watch soap operas. His subsequent investigations on the notions of time-as-now and secondary orality criticized education's disregard for the sensual, the perception and epistemology that surrounds young people; these beings living at a crossroad between palimpsest and hypertext. The former, a kind of return to the past that refuses to disappear, seeping through familiar and institutional standards into the oppression subjugating them. The latter conforming sequentiality upon which to build new scriptures and readings. For Jesús, education will not reach them as long as it disregards orality and the new forms of audiovisuality, through which flow young people's knowledge and experience.

I am very grateful to Jesús. Reading and meeting him marked my career, my work, and my relationship with Colombia. In the many times I have been to this country (where I now write this), I could explore its regions, its many shades of green, its many wonderful flavors; a little of its people, television, and political culture; and grasp the violence cutting through its history in many ways; from which it can never escape. It is this Colombia which Jesús adopted as his own, though fear and sadness would take him abroad for some time.

I am grateful for having learned much from my dialogue with his work; from the seminar we presented in Bogotá, at the Cathedral in Cali; from all my

visits to his studio for long and instigating conversations, in which he turned simple and complex questions into a contemporary social vista.

His passing deeply affected me and many others; I am, however, resigned to that paradoxical and generous side of life which, after decades of absence and before his passing, brought him back to Cali, the city he loved dearly and in which his adventure with communication began. I owe Jesús a great deal of the affective and effective relationship I cherish with this cultural fact called Latin America. ■

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