

About bridges and abysms: approaches and conflicts between cultural studies and political economy of communication from Stuart Hall's work

Sobre pontes e abismos: aproximações e conflitos entre os estudos culturais e a economia política da comunicação a partir da obra de Stuart Hall

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the approximations and tensions between cultural studies and the political economy of communication, taking the work of Stuart Hall as a contact point. From the reflections that the author proposes on the theme of ideology and the relations between economy and culture, we argue that the understanding of social phenomena cannot dispense with an approach that articulates different fields in order to reach the social totality. In his analyzes of culture, ideology, and identity, Hall uses the concrete perspective of historical materialism without limiting himself to economic determinism, especially through a posture of theoretical renewal that helps to overcome dissent between the two camps.

Keywords: Stuart Hall, cultural studies, political economy of communication, ideology, historical materialism

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RESUMO

O presente artigo reflete sobre as aproximações e tensões entre os estudos culturais e a economia política da comunicação, tomando como ponto de contato a obra de Stuart Hall. A partir das reflexões que o autor propõe sobre o tema da ideologia e as relações entre economia e cultura, argumenta-se que a compreensão dos fenômenos sociais não pode prescindir de uma abordagem que articule os diferentes campos, a fim de alcançar a totalidade social. Em suas análises sobre cultura, ideologia e identidade, Hall serve-se da perspectiva concreta do materialismo histórico sem se limitar ao determinismo econômico, sobretudo por meio de uma postura de renovação teórica que ajuda a superar as dissidências entre os dois campos.

Palavras-chave: Stuart Hall, estudos culturais, economia política da comunicação, ideologia, materialismo histórico

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In memory of Stuart Hall (1932-2014)

ENTRY DOORS: A "FAMILY" RELATIONSHIP UNDER ERASURE

TO PUT A thought *under erasure* is to leave it, in a certain way, under suspicion, but not in abandonment. On the contrary, it consists in provoking tensions in its logic of argumentation until it is purified through critical exercise¹. This is the tense and provocative relationship that Stuart Hall establishes with the Marxist heritage. To understand the historical real, Hall uses the concrete perspective of materialism without being limited to economic determinism. It is, above all, critical of the authoritarian developments of socialism in the Soviet Union and in other countries. This ambiguous attitude of approach and withdrawal, which constitutes the author's way of thinking, was understood by some of his critics as an abandonment of class questions and social transformation, as if his thought followed the postmodern tendency of alienation from material reality. However, Hall re-elaborates these questions through his reading of the historical real, by confronting the problems and possibilities associated with the notion of ideology and by approaching cultural relations from the perspective of power and hegemony, in dialogue with thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci and Karl Marx himself.

The misinterpretations of Stuart Hall's reflections reinforced the schism between two streams of studies that Mattelart (2011: 157) characterizes as the tension between two "enemy brothers": on the one hand, a perspective associated with Cultural Studies (CS); On the other, that linked to the Political Economy of Communication (EPC). For Mattelart, this hiatus was established in a specific context, from the 1980s and 1990s, between projects that were born convergently "to become distanced from one another" (ibid.). Although sometimes the research on communication and culture in Brazil tries to overcome this aspect that neglects the issues of hegemony and class struggles, underlying other debates such as gender and race, the dialogue between the political economy of communication and cultural studies also encounters difficulties.

This schism is even observed in the writings of the early writers of the political economy of communication, especially in relation to Stuart Hall and the current opened by David Morley, which led to reception studies. In a classic text on media economics, Garnham (1979) ponders the posture of post-Althusserian authors who overestimate the ideological level in communication to the detriment of economic relations. The biggest expo-

1. Unlike those forms of critique which aim to supplant inadequate concepts with 'truer' ones, or which aspire to the production of positive knowledge, the deconstructive approach puts key concepts 'under erasure'. This indicates that they are no longer serviceable - 'good to think with' - in their originary and unreconstructed form [...]: an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all." (Hall, 2000: 103-104).

ment of this group in Britain, he said, would be Stuart Hall. In the sequence, Garnham quotes Murdoch and Golding, since both criticize Hall and emphasize that it is only possible to understand the function of the means as “ideological apparatuses” from its position. “as large scale commercial enterprises in a capitalist economic system and if these relations are examined historically” (Garnham, 1979: 131).

Whoever arrives at the last minute in this academic clash, in which hidden enemies are fantasized, could suppose Stuart Hall as a detractor of Marxism on the opposite side to critical thinking. But is it not a contradiction in relation to the author’s original proposal to use the contributions of historical materialism without limiting itself to its theoretical limitations and constraints? What justifies this supposed separation between cultural studies and the political economy of communication? Would the differences between the two fields be methodological, epistemological or political? Especially in the case of Stuart Hall, who has received the sharpest criticism on the part of political economists, will there be contributions to be drawn from his work for the critical analysis of communication in the economy of capitalism?

This text seeks to delimit the borders and to perceive the approximation points between cultural studies and political economy of communication from the supposed polemic on how to place the work of Stuart Hall in that territory. If we were to think of someone as E. P. Thompson with his analysis of the working-class conceptions of the world, a way accustomed to the unorthodox trajectory of the New Left of the 1960s or someone as Raymond Williams, when analyzing the modes of cultural production, we would have more quiet openings before us for approach. However – and this is the central hypothesis of this text – Stuart Hall’s thinking is constructed from a constant dialogue with Marxism, in which the relations between culture, economy and politics are articulated in a point of view that seeks to comprehend the totality of social life. Thus, *under erasure*, Hall’s work would provide points of contact between cultural studies and the political economy of communication.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF HALL WITH MARX AND MARXISM: CONCRETE ANALYSIS OF CULTURE

Although Hall privileges the cultural dimension in his texts, he articulates the economical and the political in his readings of the present time. However, some of his interpretations seem to point to a universe without

parameters in reality, whose panel would be composed of fluid and mutant identities, in line with postmodern discourse. This is apparent from a 1987 text, suggestively entitled *Minimal selves*. To what extent does this position contradict another moment in which the author states that "Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites." (Hall 2000: 109)?

The conviviality between mutation and coherence in Stuart Hall's work puts us permanently at a crossroads: After all, where does he want to go with all this? For this question, there remains only the answer that there is no necessary place to arrive, as you would imagine of the trajectory of a vector driven by deterministic tension. There are, indeed, starting points and paths. Hall is, above all, a provocateur, a questioner of the conditions of the present time, which reinforces his relation with the Marxian matrix of thought, which turns to the analyzes of the concrete reality. According to this theoretical-methodological option, the formulation of questions is a more fruitful effort than obtaining simplistic answers.

Looking at the present time implies an effort of conjunctural analysis, if we do not want to keep up with the immediacy of punctual reactions. This endeavor goes beyond case studies or situations, although they may emerge in the flow of time. The methodology used by Stuart Hall derives, therefore, from the articulation between the economic, political and ideological instances, in order to explain the social phenomena. When he approaches the intellectual doing, Hall (2007) claims that the present situation is his object, as the product of "many determinations" (or overdeterminations, a concept derived from the idea of "*overdetermination*" by Louis Althusser), but that remains as "open horizon, fundamentally unresolved, and in that sense open to 'the play of contingency'" (Hall, 2007: 279).

There are two dimensions of present time identified by Hall: on the one hand, it does not appear loose in its crude actuality, but is associated with the course of time, which offers a history, a space-time reference; on the other hand, contemporary conditions emerge from various lines, and as a consequence there is no deterministic cause that explains the root of the problems. The point being made is: does this position approximate Hall to historical materialism, since the preoccupations with history are (literally) present, or is it a historicism without concrete basis? To answer this question, we must take a step toward Marx and the Marxists.

In discussing the question of ideology in Karl Marx's work, Hall (2003c) understands that the predominance of the economic sphere over the ideolo-

gical sphere in the writings of the German theorist is justified by his effort to overcome Hegelian idealism and, above all, the conceptions of classical political economy (by Adam Smith and David Ricardo) that grounded their analyzes of a-historical and ideal categories, such as the unrestricted freedom of commerce and profit. By naturalizing the specific historical condition of modern capitalism, Smith and Ricardo understood that social relations had reached their apex in the present system with economic freedom, and there would be no perfection, a conception from which Marx sharply disagreed, in view of the workers' material living conditions and the existence of what he called "surplus value."

From his theoretical and political project of constructing a critique of capitalism, Karl Marx supported the question of ideology under three pillars, as Stuart Hall himself (2003c: 270) points out: first, the materialist premise that "Ideas arise from material conditions"; Second, the determinism of the economic sphere over politics; And third, the connection between ideas and social classes, understanding that 'dominant' ideas are those of the 'ruling class'. It is in relation to these three premises that Hall puts the thought of Marx "under erasure," that is, appropriating it, but overcoming its limitations. According to Hall, economic determinations would be made by shaping the material conditions in which ideas are produced, distributed and consumed, but it does not define the specific content of each of them. In other words, these are determinations *without guarantees*, without absolute predictability, without reductionism.

It is the Italian thinker Gramsci (2007) who clarifies that historical materialism is not confused with economicism, that is, with the tendency to reduce social analysis to the economic dimension. Marx consecrated the celebrated phrase in the 18th *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 1974: 335). Gramsci, and then Louis Althusser, always quoted by Hall, will tailor this conception of Marx and break with the tendency to consider economics as a determinant of social life.

For Gramsci, as Hall shows, it would be reductionism to imagine that economic factors shape political and ideological conditions. Rather, what one should think is that limits and tendencies "structure and determine only in the sense that they define the terrain on which historical forces move", that is, for the author "they define the horizons of possibility" (Hall, 2003a: 308) – as in a sporting match where the size of the field and the rules



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of the match were given, but not the position of the players. Thus, Marxism is “without guarantees” because the consequences of capitalism on social life are also not definitive and inescapable, since the dominance of a set of ideas does not exclude the possibility of the insurgent, the alternative and the counter-hegemonic.

Hall, therefore, expands the concept of ideology in relation to Marx, because it contains not only a dimension of order preservation, but also the processes of transformation and renewal. It is in the “ideological struggle” (Hall, 2003c, 2003d) – expression appropriated from Antonio Gramsci, from the notion of “war of position” – that gives the class struggle the dispute to conserve or transform historical conditions. Hence Hall does not associate himself with an idealistic project, with no basis in reality. On the contrary, his approaching point with Marxism is even in his reading of cultural identity, as something constructed historically-socially and not found or given by the immutable nature of things.

Here is a contradiction: if identity is constructed, how can it be concrete? It is not a matter of opposing the concrete to the abstract, but rather the constructed to natural, the historical to the immutable – displacement that leads us again to bring Hall closer to Marxism². According to Stuart Hall (2003b), in *Marx's notes on method*, Marx's method is abstract: he tries to unmask the theory of surplus value from the concrete relation of exploitation of the wage worker, and hence to explain the fetishism of the commodity and the alienated relationships with work. In other words, Marx develops a theoretical abstraction, unattainable without intellectual effort, to shed light on what the Western European worker in the second half of the nineteenth century felt on their skin, but he did not realize it, since he was submerged in the conditions perceived in a naturalized way by imposition of the capitalist system. It is, therefore, an effort to denaturalize, that is, to transform into history – abstract to reach the concrete (we can see that these concepts, concrete and abstract, are not antagonistic).

Unlike classical political economists, such as Smith and Ricardo, who considered economic relations through an essentialist prism, that is, natural and unavoidable, Marx presents a conception according to which the different forms of production are anchored in time and material conditions. So also is Hall, by refusing individuality as something given before culture, regaining the centrality of the historical real “without which we could not have made ourselves” (Hall, 2007: 275). Cultural identity, therefore, is not dissociated from concrete reality.

2. Ironically, the same position is taken by political economist Nicholas Garnham in his 1979 text, published in the *Media, Culture and Society Journal*, in which he criticizes Hall and the post-Althusserians. For the author, “the abstract should not be opposed to the concrete, just as the phenomenal forms should not be opposed to the real relations” (Garnham, 1979: 125). The relations of exchange – eminently abstract – assume, according to him, concrete aspects in the materiality of the money form.

When Hall talks about the condition of the black migrant in British society, he refers to the conflicts of expression experienced by each of them – and we must not forget that he is speaking to some extent of his own trajectory. His perspective is concrete, that is, lived cultural practice, revealed from the diaspora movement to the struggle for identity affirmation, including the assimilation and absorption of standardized cultural forms. On the other hand, even if they narrate cases or expose facts, as Hall does with recurrence, his approach goes beyond the empirical, that is, it surpasses both the numeric and what the experience reveals.

In *Cultural studies and the centre: some problematic and problems* (1980), Hall indicates an effort from cultural studies produced in the Center of Birmingham to oppose the American functionalism. By abolishing the contradiction of their analysis (the notion facing Marxism), the functionalists use methods from natural and exact sciences, considered strong, to explain social phenomena – generating an empiricist and quantitative point of view. Again, there is the fracture between the concrete and the empirical.

So if Stuart Hall's thinking possesses some possibilities of approaching Marxism from the understanding of the historical real, why do the fields of cultural studies and the political economy of communication have difficulty in dialogue?

PATHWAYS THAT BIFURCATE: TENSION AND BREAKING POINTS BETWEEN CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COMMUNICATION

What would Stuart Hall contribute to the field of political economy of communication? Collaborations are possible, but not always desirable, due to the institutionalization of the spheres of academic knowledge. Beyond the political obstacles, there are still some barriers to overcome.

The first one concerns the level of analysis, which differentiates the path followed by cultural studies (and Hall, consequently), and the one chosen by the political economy of communication: while the first group is much more interested in the cultural practices lived and their forms of specific expression, with appreciation for the microsocial unfolding, the second search to understand the relations that are established at the macrostructural level of capitalist society. There is a decisive, but not definitive, fracture. After all, in social reality, the local and the global are articulated as instances of power. Hall himself repeatedly escapes this rule when he chooses to analyze conjuncture and recovers the concept of social

totality (Hall, 1980: 29) present in Marx and to which political economists of communication often refer. According to Hall, based on Marx, social totality is a dynamic product of differences and distinctions rather than correspondences and similarities.

Followers of both lines have adopted this differentiation between the big and the small, although it is not so clear in its origin. Culturalist research tends to focus on the content, form, uses, and consumptions of communicative practices often, disregarding instances of economic production and power structures – which generates a depoliticization of theory. Reflecting a step taken by the Birmingham Center itself towards the structuralist concept of text, this tendency to lose the historical and social link was warned by Hall (1980) when he criticized the privilege that Levi-Strauss gave to the synchronic in relation to Diachronic. On the other hand, the criticism to which the political economists of communication are subject is the reverse of the medal: the extended gaze overrides the specificities of the subjects and the dynamics of interpersonal relations, and generates distorted generalizations. As Vincent Mosco (1996) teaches, the vision that accompanies this field of study seeks to see the totality of the social dimensions and not the fragments of reality.

Still according to Mosco, the social field is dynamic and composed of numerous fractures in the process of change. For this, it is necessary to nullify the notion of mechanical causality and inaugurate the idea of mutual constitution, in which different factors are influenced. A similar concept is central to Hall's work – which shows that there is no incompatibility between the structural analyzes of the political economy of communication and Hall's thinking. It is the idea of articulation as a non-deterministic, but dynamic, relationship between practices or phenomena:

By the term “articulation,” I mean a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has constantly to be renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or to be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections – re-articulations – being forged. (Hall, 2003d: 196)

The second barrier between cultural studies and the political economy of communication is based on distinctions about the conception of culture. Hall proposes to expand the scope of this notion, since each institution or activity generates its set of practices and meanings. In this way, we can talk

about *culture* in unconventional spaces: as in the economic and the political. Hall's conception of culture is based on the notion of overdetermination: what determines and at the same time is determined. In this way, culture is understood as a constitutive part of the political and the economic, since they are spheres that are "*mutually constitutive* of one another – which is another way of saying that they are articulated with each other." (Hall 1997: 34 [emphasis added]).

Hall teaches that "every social practice *has cultural or discursive conditions of existence*" (Hall, 1997: 34 [author's italics]), a kind of face of the social phenomena as discourse. The first risk of considering the prominence of culture in the spheres of social life is the trivialization of the term: if culture is everything, it can also be nothing. What defines the characteristics of cultural expressions and practices? Is it possible to disentangle them from the social whole or are they the whole, indefinitely? The second reservation refers to a certain fatalism that the culturalist position can carry if taken to the extreme. If problems are explained only by their cultural roots, they seem to escape the changing course of history, as in the frequent conception of the common sense that says that "Brazilians are lazy," or depoliticized, that such a characteristic is part of "our culture" So "there is no way", there is no way to change. Such a limit, however, is only felt if culture is thought in a static, fixed, way, and not as Hall understands it, that is, a dynamic process.

Finally, the third caution we need to take is in relation to the certain discursive definition of culture that restricts the term to the notion of writing or literacy: after all, this is an understanding that is eminently Western, Enlightenment-based and faithful to the structuralist project. What about practices that are not translatable through writing, such as non-verbal communication or relationships with the sacred, what of societies or practices not centered on literate culture, such as Afro-Brazilian religions? According to Lévi-Strauss cited by Hall (1980), despite the variety of significant experiences, structures of sense-making are repeated through cultures. But what guarantees such predictability in ways other than the presumption of a Western reader? Hall himself, despite drinking at the structuralist source, knows that he needs to go further by proposing the expansion of "the meaning of 'culture' from texts and representations to lived practices, belief system an institutions [...]" (Hall, 1980: 23).

If in the apprehended conception of cultural studies the idea of practices and meanings experienced by the subjects prevails, for the political economy of communication the notion of culture is eminently linked to



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the idea of commodity. In a text published in the *Media, Culture and Society Journal* of 1979, Frenchman Bernard Miège analyzes the process by which capitalism is promoted by culture. According to Miège, and this position is recurrent in the authors of this movement, the cultural commodity has specificity, since it works with the imaginary and with the conceptions of the world, but it is still a commodity. More than a set of discursive practices that cross all spheres of life, culture is seen as an integrated process to the capitalist economy. The conceptualization of *cultural merchandise* seeks to see the relations between consumption and the capitalist conditions of production and reproduction

Since the 1990s, research related to cultural studies – mainly derived from the North American matrix – begins to distance itself from the understanding of culture inserted in capitalist production. Although not seeing opposition between the political economy of communication and cultural studies, Vincent Mosco (1996) criticizes this tendency from three points: firstly, by overestimating the audience freedom, as if consuming meant choosing (as a citizen); by minimizing commodification, one of the central axes of contemporary culture; and, finally, for confusing active reception with political activity, as if the most critical public in relation to TV programs, evidence shown by reception surveys, implied in alternatives of political participation.

Would there be here an unbridgeable gap between the political economy of communication and cultural studies? Would the notion of culture have condemned the two currents to antagonistic paths? From the historical point of view, both theoretical matrices have a common origin as a reaction to the political model of authoritarian socialism. However, at some point in the 1980s and 1990s, cultural studies expanded and assumed different shades, following the tendency to view culture as an autonomous field of reality. This is what Armand Mattelart and Erik Neveu associate with the depoliticization of this matrix, different from the original position of Hall and others, which generates problems that “feed mainly the populist tendencies, endowing the consumers of cultural products with a sovereign reflexivity that makes critical work Superfluous” (2004: 154). Herscovici, Bolaño and Mastrini (2000: 6) criticize the fact that “the latest developments in cultural studies have been accompanied by the neglect of themes such as classes and power,” referring to the developments taken in the 1990s. At the same time, and not by chance, this stream of studies was institutionalized as a canon in the academy, despite the transdisciplinary effort in essence of the *founding fathers*³.

3. Hall has always denied the position of founding father of cultural studies, not as one who denies the child, but for not believing that position existed: “I deny paternity – cultural studies had many origins, many ‘fathers’, but nevertheless, one feels a certain responsibility for it. (Hall, 2007: 271-272).

In fact, Hall never understood cultural studies as a discipline, because the clearly established boundaries between the sciences did not account for a changing world. His effort for transdisciplinarity results from the perception of “a disjuncture between the disciplines, on the one hand, and the rapidly shifting and changing fragments of reality which confront us today” (Hall, 2007: 276). At one point, Hall (1980) goes so far as to mock the science that has only an answer to the world if it is no longer mutable.

However, research affiliated with cultural studies gained a foothold in the hegemonic academic scenarios of communication, although there was no disciplinary institutionalization in Brazil (due to the fact that it was not necessary), in the form of studies on: reception, media usage and consumption; media culture; language, texts and images; entertainment; media practices; body; representations and identities, among others. On the other hand, the political economy of communication, especially in Brazil and in other Latin American countries, remained on the margins of hegemonic thought and still undertakes an effort to constitute the field, which often contributes to its isolation.

EXIT DOORS: BEYOND BORDERS

In Brazil, the boundaries between political economy of communication and cultural studies take on other forms, but impasses have been perpetuated and accentuated by the fracture between two antagonistic fields: on the one hand, a current focused on specific cultural dynamics, searching the reflexes of content and media consumption on the reality lived by people, generally without regard to the production and reproduction structures of cultural industries; on the other hand, a matrix concerned with conflicts of interest and the mechanisms of domination, and which examines the hegemonic groups' actions in an eminently critical bias (often close to denunciation). Among the fractures observed between the two fields are: the difficulty of articulating micro and macrosocial instances; The separation of subject and structure; and the contrast between the processes of cultural production and reproduction, on the one hand, and content consumption, on the other.

However, as seen in Hall's theoretical proposal, it is necessary to overcome the interpretive binarisms from a broader effort to understand the articulations between the different spheres of social life. This path does not mean abandoning the specificities of each angle or tool of analysis, but allowing the various matrices to dialogue from their contradictions and counterpositions – putting the differences *under erasure*. As occur in family conflicts, the first

defense is to point the other as guilty. Especially in Latin America and Brazil, where academic disputes become a breakdown of crumbs, the two camps do not communicate. Would they both be condemned to insurmountable borders? This is not the lesson learned from Hall, for whom the limits set by disciplines reduce the ability to understand the world.

Cultural problems cross the economic, political and ideological spheres – culture cannot be thought of as an isolated practice. Cultural studies, regardless of the stream to which they belong, need to discuss the issues of access and equal distribution of cultural goods and services, the ethical and social need of culture policies, and the power struggles that occur in the cultural and communicative spheres – themes of reference for the political economy of communication. This matrix needs to understand the variety of cultural agendas placed by social groups, even by the plurality of individuals, especially with respect to representation and the question of identity, and from there to seek the place of alternative practices that distend and destabilize the hegemonic framework – demands for which the source of cultural studies is rich in responses.

The two camps have common agendas, related to the centrality of culture and communication in contemporary life. One of the challenges for both is to understand the role of the subjects in social structure; For this key point, the path of analysis lies in the notion of articulation as understood by Hall, which allows us to understand how actors influence political, economic and cultural processes and are influenced by them in a dynamic of mutual constitution. In this case, PEC and CS views can work together by articulating what is macro and micro. Another challenging agenda for both camps is the political role of cultural relations in society transformation, especially regarding the exercise of citizenship, mainly in societies where there is still a lack of effective rights and democracy, as it is the case in Brazil. It is necessary to understand to what extent relations mediated by culture and communication reproduce unequal structures of power or enable the emergence of new expressions and reflections. This is a fertile ground for working the articulation between the views of political economy and cultural studies from the contributions of Stuart Hall's critical and transformative proposal, with dialogue as a way to overcome prejudices. ■

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