

For a critique of culture and communication: an approach to Armand Mattelart's *communication-world* perspective^a

Para uma crítica da cultura e da comunicação: uma abordagem à perspectiva da comunicação-mundo de Armand Mattelart

MARIANO ZAROWSKY^b

Universidad de Buenos Aires, School of Social Sciences. Autonomous City of Buenos Aires.

ABSTRACT

The notion of *communication-world* condenses the intellectual project that Armand Mattelart conceived in France towards the end of the 1980s and that was later developed with creativity and determination in the following decade. This notion is introduced and developed in his trilogy: *Mapping World Communication* (Mattelart, 1992/2003); *The Invention of Communication* (Mattelart, 1994/1995); *Histoire de l'utopie planétaire* (Mattelart, 1999/2000).. Since the mid-1980s France saw the spread of a discourse that believed that communication can explain the social; placing Mattelart's theoretical contribution in this context will allow us to account not only for the conditions that fostered his ideas, but also for their singularity and productivity to understand contemporary social organization through a critique of culture and communication.

Keywords: Armand Mattelart, intellectual history, critical theory

RESUMO

A noção de *comunicação-mundo* condensa o projeto intelectual que Armand Mattelart forjou na França em fins dos anos 1980 e desenvolveu na década seguinte. Esse projeto é apresentado e desenvolvido em sua trilogia: *Mapping World Communication* (Mattelart, 1992/2003); *The Invention of Communication* (Mattelart, 1994/1995); *Histoire de l'utopie planétaire* (Mattelart, 1999/2000). Desde meados dos anos 1980, difundiu-se na França um discurso que dava à comunicação um valor explicativo do social. Situar a posição teórica de Mattelart nesse contexto nos permitirá perceber as condições de surgimento de sua reflexão, assim como a singularidade e produtividade dessa perspectiva para compreender a organização social contemporânea, por meio da crítica da cultura e da comunicação.

Palavras-chave: Armand Mattelart, história intelectual, teoria crítica

^aA first version of this article was published in Spanish as a book chapter in Zarowsky (2013). The manuscript was reviewed, updated and especially adapted for this dossier, being published here for the first time in English and Portuguese. For Armand Mattelart's trajectory, the genesis of his thoughts on Chile communication and culture (1962-1973) and his political and intellectual bond with Latin America, see the aforementioned work and Zarowsky (2012). Translator from Spanish to English: Moyra Lynch. Copyediting: Gabriel Torem.

^bResearcher at Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas and Professor at School of Social Sciences at Universidad de Buenos Aires. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4505-577X>. E-mail: zarowskymariano@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

THE NOTION OF *communication-world* condenses the intellectual project that Armand Mattelart conceived in France towards the end of the 1980s and that was later developed with creativity and determination in subsequent years. While *Rethinking Media Theory* (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1986/1987) could be read as a transition from his previous concerns and theoretical positions, the project itself is introduced and developed in his *communication-world* “trilogy”: *Mapping World Communication* (Mattelart, 1992/2003); *The Invention of Communication* (Mattelart, 1994/1995); *Histoire de l’utopie planétaire* (Mattelart, 1999/2000). Since the mid-1980s France saw the spread of a discourse that turned communication into an explanatory value for social aspects and a solution to its problems. Placing Mattelart’s theoretical position in that context will allow us to account not only for the conditions that fostered his ideas, but also for the singularity and productivity of his approach to understand contemporary social organization through a critique of culture and communication.

THE CRITIQUE OF COMMUNICATION: BETWEEN EPISTEMOLOGY AND IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

The solution to the crisis arising from the May 1968 movement in France and the postwar exhaustion of the accumulation and distribution mode found in the discourses on technological innovation and the promise of communicative transparency a rhetoric that, based on an old imaginary around progress and modernization, sought to guide the economic, political and cultural reorganization underway, as well as to mitigate the conflicts derived from it. Already in *De l’usage des Médias in Temps de Crise*, Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart (1979/2003) drew attention to the emergence of a new philosophy, with communication as its ideological core, and pointed out “the role that the philosophy of progress had played along the 19th century” (p. 18 [our translation from the Spanish Edition]). The authors also state that satellite, cable television and computers “set up a global village, an electronic democracy, the return of the Greek forum.” The spread of the technological communication media became “the yardstick to measure the degree of evolution, civilization and harmony of a society” (p. 18).

Les Industries de l’imaginaire by Patrice Flichy (1980/1982) collected a series of speeches by businessmen, politicians and intellectuals who stated what he called the “ideology of audiovisual communication.” It matched a political project

that sought to solve the contradictions in French society through audiovisual media. Flichy quoted the harangue made by one of its promoters at a meeting of personalities: “Be the anti-May 68!” (p. 12).

Towards the mid-1980s, the failure of François Mitterrand’s socialist government and his attempt to counterbalance the global capitalist reorganization through a greater distribution of political and economic power to the benefit of the popular classes became evident. This resulted in a huge disappointment among French intellectuals and left-wing culture. At the communication level, the unfulfilled expectations regarding democratization of media systems sped up the crisis of the audiovisual public service system. Demands to privatize and liberalize networks, the marketing of sectors so far outside the law of value, and the emergence of spheres of capital valuing around new technologies and communication media fit into a discourse that made technological innovation and the “obligation to communicate” a source of legitimacy and consensus building.

Thus, it is not surprising that towards the end of the 1980s, one of Bernard Miège’s (1989) books was titled *La Société Conquise par la Communication*. Since the mid-1970s communication had experienced an irresistible rise, to the point of being recognized as a determining social venture that increasingly led to the development of specific policies and strategies. Lucien Sfez (1988/1995) agreed with this idea in his *Critique de la Communication*: communication had never been so thoroughly discussed as it was in a society unable to communicate with itself, whose cohesion was questioned, whose values were decomposing and whose symbols failed to produce unity. On a similar note, Philippe Breton and Serge Proulx (1989) published a work suggestively titled *L’explosion de la Communication*. Computers, satellites, Minitel... whereas communication techniques had always existed along history, not always had there been a discourse that made communication a central value of society. By “*explosion de la communication*,” the authors referred to the birth of a *new ideology*, the emergence of which they intended to chronologically track, the contents whereof they tried to delimit, and whose development they attempted to explain. Shortly afterwards, the same Breton (1992/2000) published *L’utopie de la Communication*: communication, like ideology, implied the allure of an all-encompassing explanatory discourse.

The abovementioned works articulate a common space, between the epistemology of communication and the ideological critique of its function within contemporary societies. *Rethinking Media Theory*, published in 1986 by Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart (1986/1987), pioneered the

need to embark on an epistemology of communication and media in France. The proliferation of discourses on new techniques – “the technological boom in France in the 1980s has given communication an extraordinary consensual value” (p. 31) – contrasted with the “wavering, uncertainties, fluctuations that surround, more than ever, the theoretical status of the field and the practices grouped under the notion of communication” (p. 31). This proliferation complicated the thought about newer devices, making the task of establishing the status of theory more arduous. The problem was not minor in the face of an “ideology of communication,” i.e., a “new egalitarianism through communication” that was expected to fulfill legitimizing functions (p. 82). For Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart, it was symptomatic that much of the knowledge about communication defined it based on its applications and uses, instead of theoretically distancing from devices (p. 28). In contrast, the authors highlighted the importance of epistemological thought, the need for theoretical distance to understand “to what extent the remodeling of communication systems affects our societies, as well as the way to analyze them (of understanding them)” (p. 22)¹. Empiricism is known to confuse the *thing* with its *concept*; the following paragraph largely summarizes the program introduced in *Rethinking Media Theory*:

Despite what might be believed from its remarkable rise among collective representations since the end of the 1970s, talking about it [communication] does not respond to a fashion, to a conjuncture, but, in fact, to a *fact of structure* [emphasis added]. Communication occupies, from now on, a central role in the strategies aimed at restructuring our societies. By means of electronic technologies, it is a key component for the reconversion of the largely industrialized countries. It accompanies the new development of powers (and counter-powers) in the domestic setting, at school, in the factory, in the office, at hospital, in the neighborhood, the region, the nation... And even more, it has become a key element in the globalization of economies and cultures. Thus, it has also become a challenge to relations between peoples, between nations and between blocs. (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1986/1987, p. 28)

¹ To support their project, they pointed out a series of factors that interfered in the production of a critical theory of communication in France. In short: a conception of culture as an elite culture; the disregard of economics and history; the “hexagonalism” of French thought; the lack of legitimacy of specialized university spaces, among others. They also warned against the ambiguities of what they called the “metaphorical temptation”, that is, the adoption in social sciences (but also in the common discourse) of a theoretical-conceptual arsenal borrowed from the life sciences and cybernetics, disciplines that turned communication into a general explanatory scheme (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1986/1987).

What we find here is the modulation of a research program: communication was consolidated in the mid-1980s as a privileged approach to understanding the ongoing reorganization of society and the representations that accompanied it. The notion of communication-world, as we will show below, would function as a touchstone for an epistemology that would question how the production of communication specialized knowledge and representations was intertwined with the management of technical systems, the globalization of economy and the production of consensus on a supranational scale.

A GENEALOGICAL PROJECT: ECONOMY AND WORLD SYSTEM

Armand Mattelart shaped his genealogical approach over the 1980s, intertwining life experiences with theoretical thoughts. A report that he produced in 1981 for the United Nations Center for the Study of Transnational Societies can be enlightening in this regard. The Center commissioned two complementary reports: one on the *negative socio-cultural impact* of transnational firms in developing countries, by Mattelart, and another on the *positive impact*, by another researcher². The objective was to produce conceptual tools for the formulation of cultural policies to either attenuate the *negative impact* of transnational firms or promote their *positive aspects*. Not very comfortable with the prospect behind the request, Mattelart questioned his own premises: was it even possible to make a two-column inventory, on the one hand the *negative effects*, on the other, the *positive effects* of transnational firms? His report interrogates about the conceptual assumptions behind the research request: considering *culture* as an isolated instance from its political and economic functions; considering *impact* as abstracting and separating the *effect* from the *causes* that explained it. Mattelart proposed instead moving research “to the much larger field of an interrogation about the global model of development, with its notion of progress, modernity, culture, mankind, and human realization” (Mattelart, 1982, p. 31). Standing on the ground where planning and management strategies were born, he concluded: “concepts are a field of struggle between groups and classes, between society development projects” (p. 39). The genealogical view that he conveyed thus incorporated an interrogation on the emergence and function of the knowledge and representations on communication.

² Mattelart introduced an excerpt of the report in the dossier of the magazine *Amérique latine*, cited here (Mattelart, 1982). Since the United Nations Center for Studies on Transnational Societies did not publish the work, Mattelart edited it as *Transnationals and Third World: The Struggle for Culture* (Mattelart, 1983).

“One day, – he wrote shortly afterwards – we shall have to examine more closely not only the genesis of communication systems but also the history of the manufacture of the concepts that made them into a privileged area of research” (Mattelart et al., 1984, p. 43).

In the early 1980s, Mattelart would gradually outline his *genealogical perspective*, that is, a particular way of introducing history in the study of communication and culture. In the so-called *Mattelart-Stourdzé Report* (Mattelart & Stourdzé, 1982/1984) written at the request of the French government, which at the time explored the possibility of designing policies for the democratization of technologies and communications (Zarowsky, 2013), the authors drew attention to the absence of historical approaches in communication studies: it was a field where social history was hardly explored, either overshadowed by the effects of technological novelties, or because studies were rather focused on dismantling the supposed power of the media text. In a passage of their work, Armand Mattelart and Yves Stourdzé (1982/1984) returned to the report that Mattelart had written together with Jean-Marie Piemme for the Audiovisual Service of the Ministry of the French Community of Belgium. There, Mattelart and Piemme argued that, in order to understand the particularity of a media system, the assumptions of a history elaborated as a *history of events* should first be questioned: the *life* of a medium had been considered from an evolutionary perspective, from its *birth* to its *expansion*, as if it were governed by a kind of internal logic. The unsaid, the unthinkable in this type of history was the articulation of the information medium with the set of underlying contradictions and structures, as Mattelart and Piemme argued:

The organic link that connects a medium to its historical-geographical era of operation, the relationship of the information media among them (both domestically and globally) and the economic-political determination that, at a given moment, leaves a mark on the social function (or also the social functions) of communication technologies (Mattelart & Stourdzé, 1982/1984, pp. 103-104).

How should we thus link the history of communication systems with their *theories* and *concepts*? How should we think the relationship between specialized knowledge, social representations, and the *movement of the real*? The question that Mattelart posed should not be read as a call to make, on the one hand, a social history of the media and communication systems and, on the other, a history of their concepts, representations or theories (which would make intelligible what would have already taken place elsewhere).

On the contrary, his genealogical approach sought to account for the articulated nature of these elements: only by “historically inscribing the manufacture of such concepts enables us to seize at once the *continuity* [emphasis added] and the *ruptures* [emphasis added] that have given rise to new approaches and new tools, and to *link them up* [emphasis added] with actual movements in the real” (Mattelart et al., 1984, p. 43). The idea of *linking* entailed a nexus between the *movements of the real* and the *manufacture of concepts*, which questioned the idea of exteriority, hierarchy and (mutual) determination between these elements. The aim was to understand the very constituent and productive character of concepts and representations – hence the reference to the *life-giving ruptures* – in the production of that movement of the real with which they form a unit. In this line, shortly afterwards, Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart (1986/1987) wrote in *Rethinking Media Theory*: “these movements of the real are articulated with movements in the scientific field, which, in turn, are an integral part of the real” (p. 92).

This genealogical perspective is more ripe in *Mapping World Communication* (Mattelart, 1992/2003) and in *The Invention of Communication* (Mattelart, 1994/1995). These works introduced Mattelart’s research on “the history of international communication and its representations” as “the history of the interwoven paths of *war*, *progress* and *culture*, and the paths of their successive rearrangements, their ebbs and flows” (Mattelart, 1992/2003, p. 18). The idea is “having the thought on communication take roots in the history of the modes of social regulation that accompany the mutations of power” (Mattelart, 1994/1995, p. 16).

The notion of communication-world, the main idea in both works, resumed and held an open dialogue with the *world-economy* and *world-system* concepts coined by the French historian Fernand Braudel and the American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein. Both refer to the formation of a global hierarchical space of interdependence in the emerging capitalism, which requires asymmetry to exist and develop.³ In connection to our interests, we will highlight some

³ According to Braudel (1979/1984), the world-economy is not to be confused with world economy, that is, the set of economic activities on the planet. Rather, it refers to the existence of an economically autonomous space of the globe, capable essentially of being self-sufficient, and to which its internal bonds and exchanges give a certain organic unity. This space is crossed by hierarchical lines, so that the space is divided into a center, into second regions that are fairly developed but related to the metropolises, and the subordinate outer margins. As Braudel (1985/1994) himself synthesizes and highlights, in agreement with Immanuel Wallerstein (who had also demonstrated the reciprocal need of the different hierarchical spaces for their conformation): “capitalism is a global inequality creation; to develop, it needs the complicity of the international economy. It is born out of the authoritarian organization of an evidently excessive space” (p. 100). We lack the space here to delve into the theoretical differences between the authors. In short: whereas for Braudel there have been various world-economies throughout history, for Wallerstein there was no world-system other than the capitalist one, from the 16th century on. See Wallerstein, (1983/2006a; 1991/1998; 2004/2006b).

elements of this perspective that may be useful to understand the Mattelart's notion of communication-world.

In the first place, Wallerstein and Braudel (and this will be lucidly exploited by the Belgian researcher) highlighted the role of techniques and communications in shaping and developing internationalization processes⁴. Secondly, Wallerstein (1991/1998) points out the need to inscribe the analysis of contemporary society into the dynamics of the capitalist world-economy. This means posing the world-system delimitation as the appropriate *analysis unit* to understand the capitalism phenomena as a world system, and a fundamental shift from state-nation-centered approaches. In the third place, the concern for the *long-term – longue durée* in Braudel's words –, was at odds with the short-time-centered approach to history and with the predominantly novelty-based stories in the history of technology and media. Finally, the need to review the divisions that had organized scientific disciplines since the 19th century, based on objects defined according to a tripartition – economics, politics, culture – that responded, as Wallerstein (1983/2006a) maintains, to the assumptions of a liberal ideology. Rather, the point was introducing “the overall integrated reality, treating successively its expression in the economic, political and cultural-ideological arenas” (pp. 7-8). To wit, the difficulty lies in defining the character of such a relationship, rather than in confirming its existence⁵. Back to our concerns: how should we understand the role of communication? And the role of the concepts and representations around it? Moreover: how do the interactions between the singular and the universal, between the local, the national and the global take place?

It is on these questions about the space-world genealogy, the contemporary phase of capitalism integration, and the role of communication, that Armand Mattelart's communication-world idea was articulated. The first time he proposed the notion was in co-authorship with Michèle Mattelart in the prologue to the Spanish edition of *Rethinking Media Theory* (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1986/1987). They introduced it as a complement to the (Braudel's) idea of world-economy, to refer to their work production context, i.e., to the deep political, economic and cultural reorganization that had communication

⁴ Peter Burke (1990/1993) points out that one of Braudel's new contributions to contemporary historiography was to highlight and place at the center of this inquiry the question of space, the role of communication and techniques in the development of the world-economy. The matter, however, is extensively developed in the work of Karl Marx. Cf. de la Haye (1979).

⁵ A similar idea about the *proximities* and mutual invasions between *sets* (economic, political, cultural and hierarchical social) is found in Braudel (1985/1994, p. 100).

as one of its vectors in the mid1980s⁶. Shortly afterwards, in *Advertising International*, Mattelart (1989) proposed the term again in connection to the global reach attained by the advertising and marketing system, as well as to the process of “Americanization,” which had been “metabolized” by or “fused” with the “world-modernity” (p. 59)⁷. The United States continued to play a decisive role in the new global architecture of telematic networks, even assuming that the other national and regional entities – he wrote – “opened their own ways to access the *communication-world* [emphasis added], using the historical power of their respective institutions” (p. 59).

It is finally in *Mapping World Communication: War, Progress and Culture* (Mattelart, 1992/2003) that his particular and unique development of the notion is introduced. In it, Mattelart will highlight the connections between the communication networks, the representations and scientific notions around them, and the globalization of exchanges, the international division of labor and the formation of a hierarchical world space. The idea of communication-world, which begins to take its own status here, retrieves, to begin with, some topics from Braudel and Wallerstein’s approach. Namely: the postulation of the capitalist world system as a *prism* and a *scale* where the analysis of the social is unavoidable; the relevance given to the role of communication – understood in a general dimension, as a mode of exchange or circulation of goods, messages and people – in the conformation of the capitalist world-system; and the use of the long-term as a framework for analysis. The notion of communication-world advances, in turn, on the multiple connections that exist in the world-system among the emergence of *technical designs* and communication *networks*, the configuration of a body of social *representations* about communication, and the elaboration of *concepts* around it. The reconstruction of this multiple articulation is one way to make the world-system construction process intelligible, and at the same time, an inescapable condition for an epistemology

⁶ They wrote: “The realities of ‘communication’ have evolved considerably, as evidenced by the privatization and deregulation processes of audiovisual institutions and telecommunications networks, the construction of a ‘*communication-world*’ [emphasis added] system in the context of a ‘world-economy’, in the Braudelian sense of the term, and the marketing of sectors (culture, education, health, religion etc.) that had, until then, remained outside the commercial circuit and that had barely been affected by the law of value. New communication technologies are not only the core of an industrial challenge, they are at the very heart of the social reorganization strategies of the connections between the State and the citizen, the local and central powers, the producers and the consumers, the employers and the employees, the teacher and the taught, the experts and the operators” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1986/1987, p. 21. [our translation from Spanish Edition]).

⁷ This was an allusion to Jean Chesneaux’s expression (1989).

of communication knowledge. The relevance, richness and complexity of Armand Mattelart's ideas lie in this duality⁸.

The communication-world approach can then be thought of as both a continuity and a review regarding some of the premises of globalization theories (and especially the notion of *cultural imperialism* associated with them) on which Mattelart himself had worked since the 1970s. Upon systematizing this review and analyzing both the transformations to the concept of cultural imperialism and the contributions and limits of the *dependency theory* as a Latin American approach to social theory, Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart (1986/1987), in *Rethinking Media Theory*, reviewed some of the criticisms to such theories, both for their economicism and for their tendency to minimize the role of “host societies.” It is interesting to note – in order to account for the particularity of its later elaboration – that Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart stressed that these critical observations could also be extended to Wallerstein's world-economy theory. They argued, quoting Wallerstein's *Capitalisme et Économie-Monde*, that “by reducing the State to an instrumental status, understanding the State as an institution ‘created out of nothing, that reflects the needs of the social forces operating in the capitalist world-economy,’ we arrive to the idea of a non-mediated dominance by the economic, which would use the political as its instrument” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1986/1987, p. 207). Both approaches inspired by the dependency theory and Wallerstein's world-economy theory showed, for the authors, a “confinement in political economy, lacking regard for political theory or social-class analyses, or for the systems of power and the State” (p. 207). These instances, on the contrary, should be understood as “places of mediation and negotiation between social, national and local actors, with divergent interests and projects” (p. 207)⁹. Armand Mattelart would then develop, since *Advertising International* (Mattelart, 1989) and

⁸ Mattelart (1992/2003) states in the presentation of *Mapping World Communication*: “The task of this book is to reconstruct the genealogy of the sphere of world communication. We will follow a multidimensional approach, analyzing the ways in which technologies and networks have taken root since the 19th century and have ceaselessly pushed back the frontiers of the nation-state. At the same time, we will bring to light the concepts, doctrines, theories, and controversies that have marked the construction of the scientific field known as *international communication*” (p. 18).

⁹ Some years later, in a different context, during a deep strategic crisis of the left and the ebb of critical perspectives, Mattelart (1992/2003) would moderate his balance on dependency theories. Without overlooking the minimization of the “extra-economic and infra-international dimensions” by some of these economists and historians, he preferred now to emphasize that these theories gave back “to capitalism its dimension as a historical system, a global system of production and exchange, whose commercial networks are increasingly weaving ties, on the one hand, among the economic, the political, the cultural, and the scientific spheres, and, on the other, among the local, national and transnational spheres” [our translation from the Spanish Edition, p. 252]. Quoting an excerpt from *Le capitalisme historique*, he would now acknowledge that Wallerstein – in line with Fernand Braudel's world-economy – helped “to surmise how the world-system concept has borne on the ideas about the genesis of communication networks” (p. 252).

especially since *Mapping World Communication* (Mattelart, 1992/2003), a long-term research where he will attempt a genealogy of the multiple instances of mediation in which these bonds were woven (and questioned). He will thus shape a particular modulation on the concept of space-world that, from a Gramscian background, will analytically bring to the fore the function of *intellectuals* as producers of representations and management strategies for the social, that is, as architects of mediation between national formations and conflicting groups. In this line, Mattelart will assign a key role not only to representations about communication, but also to the elaboration of the concepts that turned communication into a scientific research object.

THE GRAMSCIAN IMPRINT: COSMOPOLITAN INTELLECTUALS IN THE FORMATION OF A GLOBALIZED SPACE

Opposed to the economicism in many formulations of *cultural imperialism*, towards the end of the 1970s, Mattelart had highlighted the variety of crossings between the national and the international, and the need to account for the role of intellectuals as mediators between these instances. In “Notas al margen del imperialismo cultural”, Mattelart (1978) wrote that Antonio Gramsci, with his notion of *hegemony*, had drawn attention to the variable game of relations of local and international forces, and to the action that certain international actors – intellectuals – played in this game through a series of cultural and ideological transmission circuits (pp. 1011)¹⁰.

From then on, Mattelart worked in a productive and original way on two questions barely addressed by the scholars that studied Antonio Gramsci. On the one hand, he would make a productive use of the Italian communist’s observation about the *international character* of certain intellectual formations, describing the networks that – especially since the 19th century – wove a space of mediation between the international plane and local spheres. On the other, he would take the character of this new *organic intellectual figure* emerging in the early 20th century very seriously, the one described by Gramsci in his notes on “Americanism and Fordism,” when he reflected on the transformations of North American society in the 1920s and 1930s (Gramsci, 2006).

Regarding the first point, Mattelart (1992/2003) maintains in *Mapping World Communication* that Gramsci’s remarks in *Analysis of Situations, Relations of Force* triggered questions about the role of cultural mediation processes in

¹⁰ On the notions of hegemony and intellectuals in Gramsci’s school of thought, we refer to Gramsci (1993, 2004, 2006) and two of his classic commentators in the 1970s: Buci-Gluksmann (1975/1978) and Portelli (1972/1997).

shaping the asymmetric interdependence of the world-economy (pp. 255-256). By highlighting a series of cultural and ideological transmission circuits, Gramsci had illustrated the action of a set of international actors in shaping local and international power balances. As quoted by Mattelart (1992/2003), the Italian communist wrote:

Religion, for example, has always been a source of these national and international ideological-political combinations, and so too the other international organizations – Freemasonry, Rotarism [which appeared to Gramsci to be one of the important networks for the transmission of Americanism], the Jews, career diplomacy. These propose political solutions of diverse historical origin, and assist their victory in particular countries– functioning as *international political parties* which operate within each nation with the full concentration of the international forces. But religion, Freemasonry, Rotary, Jews, etc., can be subsumed into the category of *intellectuals* whose function, on an international scale, is that of mediating the extremes, of *socializing* the technical discoveries which provide the impetus for all activities of leadership, of devising compromises between, and ways out of, extreme solutions (Gramsci, 1974 cited by Mattelart, 1992/2003, p. 256).

Gramsci highlighted the existence of international intellectual formations, underlining their function of ideological mediation, but also their function as agents of management and organization of the technical resources available in a society. Hence the notion of *international political party* suggested by the Italian communist, for whom, Mattelart (1992/2003) recalled, “the term *party* has a much broader meaning than the one attributed by political science or by common usage: it overlaps with the meaning of *organizer* or *organic intellectual* and is inseparable from the concept of hegemony” (p. 256). Mattelart thus highlighted a dimension that went unnoticed in the readings of Gramsci that were in vogue during the 1980s – mainly in the field of *cultural studies* – that took their notion of hegemony from a strictly cultural and/or national standpoint¹¹. Mattelart (1992/2003) concluded that the Gramscian work invited the “analysis of consensus-producing networks and systems of alliance on an international scale” and “taking into account

¹¹ In this point, it is worth noting the distortion introduced by the publication of Gramsci’s notebooks as thematic volumes. In some versions, for example, in Argentina (Gramsci, 1993), the fragment quoted here and collected by Mattelart is inserted as a footnote at the end of the book. A critical reference to Gramsci’s writings in the 1980s is found in Mattelart & Mattelart (1986/1987).

the mediations and mediators in the encounter between individual cultures and the world-space” (p. 257)¹².

This question is related to the second aspect that Mattelart explores with originality – the notion of intellectual in Gramsci. As early as in the late 1970s, Mattelart made his first contributions to a rationalization of the North American state apparatus, showing its possible implications for the analysis of the hegemony production system transformation in course at that time in Europe. Mattelart proposed the notion of *Taylorization of the sphere of hegemony* based on his reading of Gramsci’s *Americanism and Fordism*¹³, highlighting what the reflections of the Italian communist could show in connection to the way Europe reorganized both its mode of production of goods and the forms of exercise of moral and intellectual leadership (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1979/2003; Mattelart, 1979/2010)¹⁴.

Maybe it is in *Advertising International* (Mattelart, 1989) where Mattelart shows most clearly his productive and singular reading of the Gramscian approach aspects cited above; Mattelart traces the history of advertising agencies and the multiple forms that overlapped with the communication media at a time when the advertising standard was consolidated as the rule of cultural production. The thesis posed by Mattelart was that, after a first stage of internationalization under North American predominance in the post-World War 2 period, *advertising* had changed its status: since the late 1970s, advertising companies grew and became more diverse, offering *communication and*

¹² Gramsci drew attention to the cosmopolitan role of Italian intellectuals, understanding that this characteristic represented a fundamental obstacle to the formation of an Italian *national culture*. The notion emerged in comparison with the *national* character of intellectual formations in France at the time of the 1789 revolution. From the existence of the Roman Empire to the development of the Catholic Church with its Vatican headquarters in Rome, the historical conformation of Italian intellectuals was marked by cosmopolitanism. “The problem of intellectuals – notes Gramsci (2004) – can be shown in all its complexity through this investigation” (p. 38 [our translation]).

¹³ Gramsci (2006) understood Americanism as a new mode of goods production but also as a new type of society management and organization of culture. That is why he pointed out that the political function was being assumed in the United States by intellectuals of a new type: “hegemony here is born in the factory and requires only a minute quantity of professional, political and ideological intermediaries for its exercise”. However, in the 1930s this process was in its initial phase and yet to be developed – wrote Gramsci – “except sporadically perhaps” (pp. 291-292). In France, Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1975/1978) drew attention to the relevance of these Gramscian insights to describe the European situation in the 1970s. He interpreted that, in Gramsci’s conception of Americanism, hegemony did not separate the factory from society and concerned precisely all ways of life: the infrastructure more directly dominated the superstructure, hence a new type of intellectual. Buci-Glucksmann concluded: “Gramsci’s modernity and relevance is clear since he captures, in this type of development, that monopoly capitalism has turned into a commonplace, a functioning of ideologies” (p. 111 [our translation]).

¹⁴ A constant in Armand Mattelart’s works since the late 1980s is his invitation to consider Antonio Gramsci’s observations on *Americanism and Fordism* (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1987/1988; Mattelart, 1992/2003; Mattelart, 1994/1995). In *Rethinking Media Theory*, he writes with Michèle Mattelart (1986/1987): “Gramsci pointed out that ‘hegemony is born in the factory’ and saw in Fordism this culture in charge of ideologically laying the foundations of the working society. A frequently forgotten topic by ideological and cultural subjection researchers was that of work and its specific place: the company” (p. 89 [our translation from the Spanish Edition]).

management services for companies and States. Advertising then exceeded its traditional scope to become a mode of communication and social management – organization standard of cultural production, of work processes within companies, as well as management of the public sphere. The advertising agencies born in the United States were the beachheads of this process. Their networks – which Mattelart describes in his book, providing a methodical account of their genesis, development and transformations – contributed to weave an increasingly compact mesh between *culture* and *society*. The institutions of what he called the “advertising international” played a role in both economic organization and political-cultural leadership: together with the finance sector (with which they had interpenetrated since the 1980s), these agencies were in “the vanguard in the process of globalizing the market” (Mattelart, 1989, p. 116).

It is no wonder that Mattelart (1989) defined his history of the advertising international as *a book about intellectuals*. Of course, he soon clarified, they were not defined as they were *not so long ago* in France, based on their role and their exercise of criticism. Rather, it was Mattelart’s idea to include in this category “these new mediators and bearers of knowledge and knowhow who run this institution and this industry of public noise” (p. 24). Thus, *Advertising International* was the genealogy of the constitution of a type of international intellectual formation, which fulfilled an outstanding function at a time when – as Mattelart noted – there was a global consolidation of a “new regime of truth” that was moving away from the “Welfare State” and public services as organizing pillars of social life to business, private interests and the free action of market forces as “new ways of managing relationships between people” and “new ways of exercising power” (p. 20).

Regarding this point, two issues should be noted. First, for Mattelart, the analysis of the space-world configuration does not imply the existence of a necessary and homogeneous process of global subsumption to an economic or cultural pattern but rather a development made of contradictions and conflicts, a continuously open and unfinished process. This is also a Gramscian imprint¹⁵.

¹⁵ In connection with this, he is categorical when he writes: “in the alchemy of relations between economic and cultural forces, the transplant of modernity by means of new sales techniques has often produced contradictory processes where adherence and connivance are mixed up with both rejection and mimetic behaviour, and the more or less critical appropriation of external contributions. More exhaustive work remains to be done to examine in detail this difficult gestation of both universalising modernity and territorial singularity, this permanent dance of unequal exchange” (Mattelart, 1989, p. 60). In the same sense, in *Mapping World Communication*, he pointed out that the need to consider “the mediations and the mediators” that the Gramscian program proposed had been “stifled by polarizations that led to seeing *blocs* where there was in fact diversity, smoothness where there was roughness, simple equations where there was cultural complexity, and one-way traffic of meaning where there was circulation” (Mattelart, 1992/2003, p. 257).

Second, and connected with this, it should be underlined that from Mattelart's perspective, the role of these intellectual formations is not reduced to that of executors of processes external to their actions, as if such processes could be developed outside an economic logic of their own. On the contrary, in his view, as in Gramsci's, the role of intellectuals is *productive*, or in other words: intellectual formations contribute to articulate these movements of the real. Thus the importance of analyzing them to understand the relationships between economy, culture and society and to make the tendencies that direct and strain their articulation intelligible. This question is then related to another key aspect of Mattelart's perspective, linked to the role of the imaginary in the constitution of the communication-world.

THE IMAGINARIES OF COMMUNICATION-WORLD (OR THE BENJAMINIAN IMPRINT)

“The link between economic rationality and political and cultural rationality: *this impossible question* [emphasis added] has haunted the contemporary history of critical theories of communication from the outset”, observed Armand Mattelart and Michèle Mattelart (1987/1988, p. 75) in *The Carnival of Images*, when drawing a balance of the two most relevant critical traditions in the field of communication and culture studies: the political economy of communication and the analysis of communication as a vehicle for ideological reproduction. The mutual accusations of economicism or idealism did not manage to hide the questions that both left unanswered: both approaches “found it difficult to *conceive the imaginary as an active and essential dimension of all social practices* [emphasis added]. One has the impression that the analysis stops at precisely the moment that new questions are posed” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1987/1988, p. 76).

The indication of this void around the imaginary as an active and essential dimension of all social practices allows us to address another core aspect of the genealogical project that Armand Mattelart will display in his communication-world trilogy. From then on, the author focuses on examining a series of milestones in the production of an image of modernity where the *representations about communication* play a predominant role. Mattelart will integrate this analysis of the *imaginary of communication* to the study of the conformation of the international intellectual mediation spaces that we have analyzed¹⁶.

¹⁶ It should be added that Mattelart has not made his theoretical conception of the *imaginary* explicit. He only defines it, as quoted above, as an *active and essential dimension of all social practices*.

We will elaborate on one of the cases usefully analyzed by Mattelart to understand how he relates the emergence of what we call an imaginary of world communication, the function of *cosmopolitan intellectuals*, and the modulation of a transnational sphere. We refer to the historical reconstruction made by Mattelart, following Walter Benjamin and his writings on Paris, *Capital of the 19th Century*, of those great worldwide events, centered in France, that were the Universal Expositions held between the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. To these, Mattelart dedicates several pages of *Mapping World Communication* (Mattelart, 1992/2002) and of *The Invention of Communication* (Mattelart, 1994/1995). These events and their *temples of steel and glass*, true spaces for international mediation, exhibited on each occasion the technical innovations available – preeminently including communication technologies – along with the Utopian representations that accompanied them at every opportunity, thus helping to link the techniques and representations about communication with the *idea of progress*. These events also helped to configure an international space for the globalization of cultural exchanges and the circulation of goods. As the reconstruction proposed by Mattelart shows, the Universal Expositions had the prominent role of being a whole set of political-cultural mediators. The first one, in Paris, for example, featured personalities such as Michel Chevalier, a former member of the mythical school of Henri de Saint Simon, a true intellectual vanguard committed to designing ideas and strategies on the communication-world¹⁷. If Walter Benjamin had called attention to the role of exhibitions in shaping a story that made technique an effective and unlimited vehicle for progress, Mattelart’s genealogy elaborates on one of its modulations or particular contents: the *communication Utopia*, as a promise of a *universal human bond* through technical mediation, which found one of its landmarks in world exhibitions¹⁸.

Indeed, Mattelart demonstrates throughout his communication-world trilogy how, along with the development of the techniques and communication networks that were exhibited – and even tested – there, the Universal Expositions became a

¹⁷ By the mid-18th century, with the appearance of the railway, the concept of the network had established itself in France as the first formulation of a redemptive ideology of communication. Communication networks were considered as creators of a new universal bond (Mattelart, 1994/1995, p. 113). Mattelart shows how the Utopian ideal of an egalitarian society, advocated by Saint Simon, was transformed, among his disciples, including Michel Chevalier, into the principle of reorganization of a society (France) that was migrating to an industrial society. It is not surprising that one of the main architects of the Universal Exposition held in Paris in 1867 was Chevalier, who in charge of the publication of the official reports of the exhibition, was responsible for designing its philosophy (p. 157).

¹⁸ On the Universal Expositions, the emergence of certain *phantasmagorias* typical of modernity around merchandise and techniques, cf. Benjamin (1999) and one of his classic commentators, Buck-Morss (1995, 2005).

space for the multiplication of the symbolism of progress, the closeness of peoples and general harmony. Each new technical invention exhibited (railroad, telegraph, telephone) offered the opportunity to update a promise of redemption: Universal Expositions – according to Mattelart (1994/1995) – “shared with the communication network a common imaginary, a common quest for a lost paradise of human community and communion. Both reinvent and take mutual comfort in the construction of a myth of this transparent universal bond” (p. 155).

This communal Utopia that meant the reconciliation of social antagonisms was intimately linked to the mythology of the “closeness of peoples” and to the representation of a kind of material unity of humankind. The official advertising for the 1867 Paris Universal Exposition can be connected to this, Mattelart (1994/1995) quoted it from Benjamin himself: “To tour this palace, circular like the Equator, is literally to take a turn around the world, since all peoples are here: enemies live in peace side by side” (p. 154). A particular image was portrayed in the spatial design of the Exposition, its international stands and the multiplication of communication networks and commercial exchanges took place on a planetary scale: the global space, so encompassing that could fit into an exhibition ground, or, better, in the palm of the hand that held the brochure that presented the Exposition, transparent like exhibition’s glass and steel structures. In short, Mattelart (1992/2003) followed the Benjaminian intuition about how the image of a universal peaceful human bond that articulated the utopia of progress was closely linked to the image of a humankind unified through global interconnection. The new scenario of international exchanges depicted by the exhibitions of the Universal Expositions, profoundly modified, as the author wrote, “the representations of the world and their ways of experiencing the relation between [the] national and international” (p. 59).

But in addition to creating and amplifying an imaginary of progress and universal community, the expositions contributed to the formation of a material global exchange network. With the exhibitions – Mattelart (1992/2003) concludes – “new forms of circulation of knowledge, new synergies between experts and industrialists, new modes of interdisciplinarity, new types of relations between science and art, industry and art, gradually appeared” (p. 80)¹⁹. The analysis of

¹⁹ In the context of imperial expansion and of a double hegemony in the world-system – London was the center of the world-economy and held world hegemony on the technical routes and networks of communication; Paris aspired to dictate the trend of legitimate culture on a planetary level –, the *Universal Exposition* formula was multiplied in cities around the planet, including in several peripheral countries, which came to mount their stands at the Parisian fairs. The exhibitions contributed to the configuration of a national and international scientific community through the adoption of legal and technical standards of international validity, for example, or through the regulation of information flows. They were also a space where the most diverse cultural and scientific societies in the world shared the description of the state of the art of their disciplines, giving rise to some national and international specialized publications.

the Universal Expositions is projected, in short, as a code for understanding the long-term formation and evolution of the communication-world.

A GENEALOGY OF COMMUNICATION KNOWLEDGE

The celebration of harmony between peoples and classes shown in the Universal Expositions is striking – suggests Susan Buck-Morss (1995) – because of the proximity of each one of its editions with the great social upheavals that marked Europe and the United States with blood and fire from 1848 to 1939. We highlight this observation because, in the long-term history that Mattelart suggests, this contiguity between social crisis and the expansion of technical utopias is constant – even until the end of the 20th century. It brings attention to the prism with which Mattelart examines the historical configuration of the communication-world: its result is the product of the ways in which, in a game of crossed appropriations, the techniques of crowd management and the struggles and resistance they promoted are interwoven.

Mattelart suggests that the history of the disciplines and specialized communication knowledge should be read precisely from this idea of conflict. Unlike the traditional chronicle of ideas, which locates their unfolding in a succession of internal dialogues, the author's *genealogy* in *Mapping World Communication* highlights the multiple links that connect the development and circulation of communication knowledge with the great upheavals in the 19th and 20th centuries. From this approach, with his Foucaultian imprint, Mattelart (1992/2003) organizes his historical research, analyzes the formations and institutions where communication concepts and knowledge are produced, and accounts for their global circulation and geopolitical effects. Communication – he writes – “is used, in the first place, to wage war” [our translation]. This shadowy origin is the “blind spot” in any thinking about it (p. 18)²⁰. With a very precise documental reconstruction, from the emergence of the telegraph to photography and the elaboration of the *information* and *communication* notions in the context of World War I; from the Russian Revolution to the emergence of *theories of mass communication* in a North America stirred by Fordism and then by the crisis of 1930; from the post-War Third World insurgency and the Cold War notion of *communication for*

²⁰ Following the Nietzschean school of thought, Michel Foucault postulated that war was the key component for thinking history, understanding “invasion” as the inaugural event of societies. Thus, against the contractarian philosophical-legal conceptions, Foucault's historical-political ideology subverted the order of terms to understand the relationship between force and truth. Foucaultian genealogy, says Tomás Abraham (1976/1996), “exposes the way in which power relations activate rules of law through the production of discourses of truth. This is what sociologists call ‘legitimacy’ and Foucault, devices of knowledge-power and politics of truth” (p. 8).

development, to the 1960s and 1970s' upheavals and the emergence of theories on the *information society* in the context of the welfare state crisis, Mattelart (1992/2003) highlighted how “war and its logic are essential components of the history of international communication and of its doctrines and theories, as well as its uses” (p. 18). War is also the inescapable substrate to also think about *moments of peace*, that is, the production of techniques, knowledge and representations that will then operate during the management of crisis. “The history of international communication and its representations – in short – is a history of the interwoven paths of *war*, *progress* and *culture*, and the paths of their successive rearrangements, their ebbs and flows” (p. 18). The long history of communication-world is thus also the history of the theories and doctrines that participate in its configuration. Mattelart places these knowledge-power relations on an international scale. ■

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abraham, T. (1996). Prólogo. In M. Foucault, *Genealogía del racismo* (pp. 7-11). Altamira. (Original work published in 1976)
- Benjamin, W. (1999). *Poesía y capitalismo: Iluminaciones II*. Taurus.
- Braudel, F. (1984). Las divisiones del espacio y del tiempo en Europa. In F. Braudel, *El tiempo del mundo* (Civilización material, economía y capitalismo: siglos XV-XVIII, Vol. 3, pp. 5-64). Alianza. (Original work published in 1979)
- Braudel, F. (1994). *La dinámica del capitalismo*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. (Original work published in 1985)
- Breton, P. (2000). *La utopía de la comunicación*. Nueva Visión. (Original work published in 1992)
- Breton, P., & Proulx, S. (1989). *L'explosion de la communication*. La Découverte.
- Buci-Glucksmann, C. (1978). *Gramsci y el Estado: Hacia una teoría materialista de la filosofía*. Siglo XXI. (Original work published in 1975)
- Buck-Morss, S. (1995). *Dialéctica de la mirada*. Visor.
- Buck-Morss, S. (2005). *Walter Benjamin: Escritor revolucionario*. Interzona.
- Burke, P. (1993). *La revolución historiográfica francesa, la Escuela de los Annales: 1929-1989*. Gedisa. (Original work published in 1990)
- Chesneaux, J. (1989). *Modernité-monde*. La Decouverte.
- de la Haye, Y. (Ed.). (1979). *Marx & Engels on the means of communication (the movement of commodities, people, information & capital): A selection of texts*. International General.
- Flichy, P. (1982). *Las multinacionales del audiovisual: Por un análisis económico de los media*. Gustavo Gilli. (Original work published in 1980)

- Gramsci, A. (1974). *Antología*. Siglo XXI.
- Gramsci, A. (1993). *La política y el Estado moderno*. Planeta Agostini.
- Gramsci, A. (2004). *Los intelectuales y la organización de la cultura*. Nueva Visión.
- Gramsci, A. (2006). *Notas sobre Maquiavelo, sobre la política y sobre el Estado moderno*. Nueva Visión.
- Mattelart (1978). Notas al margen del imperialismo cultural. *Comunicación y Cultura*, 6(6), 7-27.
- Mattelart, A. (1982). Aide-memoire pour l'analyse de l'impact culturel des firmes multinationales. *Amérique latine*, 9, 31-42.
- Mattelart, A. (1983). *Transnationals and the third world: The struggle for culture*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Mattelart, A. (1989). *La internacional publicitaria*. Fundesco.
- Mattelart, A. (1995). *La invención de la comunicación*. Siglo XXI. (Original work published in 1994)
- Mattelart, A. (2000). *Historia de la utopía planetaria: De la ciudad profética a la sociedad global*. Paidós. (Original work published in 1999)
- Mattelart, A. (2003). *La comunicación-mundo: Historia de las ideas y de las estrategias*. Siglo XXI. (Original work published in 1992)
- Mattelart, A. (2010). *Para un análisis de clase de la comunicación: Introducción a comunicación y lucha de clases* (Vol. 1). El Río Suena. (Original work published in 1979)
- Mattelart, A., & Mattelart, M. (1987). *Pensar sobre los medios: Comunicación y crítica social*. Fundesco. (Original work published in 1986)
- Mattelart, A., & Mattelart, M. (1988). *El carnaval de las imágenes: La ficción brasileña*. Akal. (Original work published in 1987)
- Mattelart, A., & Mattelart, M. (2003). *Los medios de comunicación en tiempos de crisis*. Siglo XXI. (Original work published in 1979)
- Mattelart, A., Delcourt, X., & Mattelart, M. (1984). *¿La cultura contra la democracia? Lo audiovisual en la época transnacional*. Mitre.
- Mattelart, A., & Stourdézé, Y. (1984). *Tecnología, cultura y comunicación*. Mitre. (Original work published in 1982)
- Miège, B. (1989). *La société conquise par la communication*. Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.
- Portelli, H. (1997). *Gramsci y el bloque histórico*. Siglo XXI. (Original work published in 1972)
- Sfez, L. (1995). *Crítica de la comunicación*. Amorrortu. (Original work published in 1988)
- Wallerstein, I. (1998). *Impensar las ciencias sociales: Límites de los paradigmas decimonónicos*. Siglo XXI. (Original work published in 1991)

- Wallerstein, I. (2006a). *El capitalismo histórico*. Siglo XXI. (Original work published in 1983)
- Wallerstein, I. (2006b). *Análisis de sistemas-mundo: Una introducción*. Siglo Veintiuno. (Original work published in 2004)
- Zarowsky, M. (2012). Armand Mattelart: Un itinerario intelectual entre América Latina y Europa. *A contracorriente*, 9(2), 221–247. <https://bit.ly/36MQBEj>
- Zarowsky, M. (2013). *Del laboratorio chileno a la comunicación-mundo: Un itinerario intelectual de Armand Mattelart*. Biblos.

Article received on July 10, 2020 and approved on November 18, 2020.