How to be a citizen: politics, globalization and algorithms

Como ser cidadão: política, globalização e algoritmos

LARISSA LEDA F. ROCHA[a]
Universidade Federal do Maranhão, Departament of Social Communication. São Luís – MA, Brazil

ABSTRACT

This work is a critical review of the book *Ciudadanos reemplazados por algoritmos*, published by Néstor García Canclini, in 2019. It discusses, in the form of an essay, how to be a citizen in the context of global and digital capitalism, which rearranges previously solid concepts of citizenship, politics, and globalization. When traditional systems of doing politics seem to fail, the author seeks for understandings, answers, and solutions in the new forms of participation and claim, young people, and hacker cultures, focusing on the dangerous combination of algorithmic opacity and data transparency.
Keywords: Citizenship, politics, algorithms

[a] Professor of UFMA. Member of Ibero-American Observatory of Television Fiction (Obitel), and Obitel Brazil Network. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6930-3435. E-mail: larissa.leda@ufma.br

RESUMO

Este trabalho trata-se de uma resenha crítica do livro *Ciudadanos reemplazados por algoritmos*, publicado por Néstor García Canclini, em 2019. Na obra, o autor discute, em forma de ensaio, como ser cidadão no capitalismo global e eletrônico, em um contexto no qual se reorganizam conceitos, antes seguros, de cidadania, política e globalização. Quando os sistemas tradicionais de fazer política parecem falhar, o autor busca compreensão, respostas e saídas nas novas formas de participação e reinvindicação, nos jovens e nas culturas do hackeamento, atentando para a perigosa combinação da opacidade dos algoritmos e da transparência dos nossos dados.
Palavras-chave: Cidadania, política, algoritmos

R

I N OCTOBER 2019, after García Canclini finished writing *Ciudadanos reemplazados por algoritmos* (2019)[1], a series of protests began to occur in Chile, considered the South America's most prosperous country and the first to entrench an orthodox neoliberalism. The eruption of Chile demonstrations was spearheaded by young students in response to a fare increase in public transport; from that, they started addressing more specific (such as health-related) and more diffuse demands (for dignity) and, finally, escalated to demands for the revision of the national constitution – a legacy of Pinochet's dictatorship.

The president of the republic, Sebastián Piñera, who initially announced that the country was at war (Montes, 2019a), ended up apologizing for his lack of vision toward social issues in a scenario where "the political class as a whole seems to be the target of widespread popular dissatisfaction" (Montes, 2019b). Undoubtedly, Chile exposes and bespeaks questions that guide the work of García Canclini: what alternatives we have in face of a global and digital capitalism, an opaque and distant public space, whereby neoliberal uses of technologies sustain and aggravate the chronic inequalities of capital? Where does the citizen and the vote belong in the face of such dispossession? How can we rethink the issues of political sociology from the perspective of citizens? What are they feeling, living, experiencing in relation to new ways to communicate?

Paying special attention to Latin America's events and how its citizens respond to insecurity, precarious working conditions, unemployment, distrust with the traditional political mechanisms, and the use of networks for mobilizations purposes, García Canclini (2019) composes an essay with precious readings of recent political and social events, such as the movement "Ele Não", sparked during the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections, and "YoSoy132", during the 2012 Mexican presidential elections. The choice for the essay is grounded, based on the meaning proposed by Adorno, on being "something that is exposed to show its complexity, given it cannot be explained"[2] (p. 24).

[2] In the original: "Algo que se expone para mostrar su complejidad, porque no se puede explicar". This and other translations, by the author.

However, what can interlock heterogeneous movements in countries with distinct characteristics, such as Chile, Brazil, and Mexico? According to the author, the economic and communicational globalization is a place that shares crises and confusions of elites and popular sectors that lack understanding on how to execute the social. A global system that we thought to work is decomposing: we experience a transnational *desciudadanización*[3]. Although several factors corroborate for this outcome, we may name three: parties elitization and disassociation from social basis; media commodification, reducing their social function; and citizen's perception that their protests and sorrows are unlistened by public authorities. Thus, it represents the decomposition of

[3] We chose to leave it in the original in Spanish, however the free translation that most closely matches the term is Citizenshipless.

the idea of democracy, in its modern sense, which loses coherence before a policy that terminates the agreements established between States, companies, and social rights. We are set beyond, warns García Canclini (2019, pp. 15-16), the plurality of meanings so-thought in the early years of the internet and the multicultural fragmentation celebrated by postmodernism, and we need to discuss the survival of partisan politics, hence the idea of *depoliticization*; the insufficient technocratic vision, which believes it to be possible to entrust society's organization to algorithms considered neutral and assume that GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon) and its algorithms reshape the social understanding of habits, work, consumption, and communication by redefining the economic-political power. That is, we are before a novel understanding of living together.

Besides the concept of *desciudadanización* and depoliticization, the author also mentions *deglobalization*. Exploring changes in the civilizing sense, in our roles as "citizens-consumers-users", becomes unfeasible without such perspectives. Globalizing desires are boosted by acknowledging globalization as the culprit for devastating jobs and social benefits, collapsing the purchasing power, and vanishing with rights and guarantees, especially for young people, who receive special attention in the essay. At the same time, digital technologies and globalization make us believe that we have access to more information, entertainment, space for participation and debate, goods and services unrestrained to our nations. Globalization is, after all, functional for the capital and data algorithmic manipulation, but not for the daily lives of consumers and citizens who get to live with the ghost of personal datal collection and sale to enjoy the benefits of the global connection. "In the end, the only thing that seems to have globalized is the feeling that almost all of us have lost"[4] (García Canclini, 2019, p. 10).

And we lose even more in the transition from media citizens to monitored citizens. *Video politics* – a concept referring to the author's perspective of teleparticipation (García Canclini, 2000) – determines an earlier phase of mass communication, whereby public opinion started to be displayed on screens, in the media apparatus; however, we are now experiencing a remodeling of citizenship. And of communication. From the streets to the screen, from screens to data. For the author, we now live an *algorithmic governance,* and *desciudadanización* ambivalences both complicate and expand the new pacts between citizens and digital powers. Yet, political parties have lost their credibility and capacity to represent public interests both in these two communication stages, and in the two governance forms, so that the media have taken over this fundamental place of intermediation and social deliberation. The point is: although internet utopian

[4] In the original: "Lo único que al final parece haberse globalizado es la sensación de que casi todos perdemos".

R

visions believed they could democratically control the media, in a shared and deliberate way, data are not independent of their users, nor can they guarantee a planned, rational, and democratic future. Differently from its previous stage (the statistical governance), in the algorithmic governance data is collected by private companies for marketing and advertising purposes rather than for specific ends based on governmental requests.

According to García Canclini (2019), this is where lies the importance of thinking about young people – what is received and forfeited by their actions, ways of moving, producing, communicating, and feeling – and systems hacking tools. Capable to exercise innovative initiatives in politics and in forms of participating, young people have feature movements challenging government performance and institutions transparency (including the media), besides being acquainted with the novel ambience of networks. However, although symbolic and performatic in their onsets, their demonstrations do not necessarily unfold into real and lasting changes. Youth participation in electoral processes is likewise perceived in lower frequency, as they consider politics as exercised by joining not parties, but causes; to a greater extend, not causes, but events "in marches and meetings in the networks, the movement of transition from duel to politics is costly "[5] (p. 77).

When observing how the youth does politics, one cannot disregard the vulnerability, precariousness, and inequality that affects them. Young individuals are the most affected by the violence of dispossession that characterizes the *desciudadanización* and deglobalization, it depicts the "experience of feeling unnecessary"[6] (García Canclini, 2019, p. 64). The unrightful precariousness, which first appeared among young individuals, increases with digital connectivity and crosses different sectors with the growth of companies that actuate on platforms. Along with the youthful power, the hacker culture emerges to disturb the system. Although breathing, the traditional ways of doing politics seem to agonize; parties and politicians are discredited; the sense of belonging, security, and future are destabilized; and a new socio-communicational organization looms. This context fosters the allurement by authoritarian politics, the choice of politicians who do not represent the majority of the population, but are elected even so, and also the acceptance of uncomfortable and rather urgent solutions, as those proposed by the hacker culture. According to García Canclini (2019), certain types of hackings have political value, such as those that expose things that governments would like to remain invisible, because although not enough to dismantle the system in its whole, they bring down pretensions of total control. We are hacked when the government and companies collect, subtract our data – not just for a specific purpose, but for a myriad of them.

[5] In the original: "En las marchas y reuniones en las redes nos cuesta pasar del duelo a la política".

[6] In the original: "La experiência de sentirse prescindible".

These data are manipulated and used as an attempt to control and maintain us in worthy discipline.

It comprises a "bait economy," a "digital capitalism," whereby companies such as Google offer us services for which we do not pay in cash, but still cost us a lot – our most personal information. Information that will be used against us. The dangerous combination of opaque algorithms and data transparency, both uneven and asymmetric, disrupts our ability to play our role as citizens. For the author, we should, like never before, be formulating more radical questions about the type of hegemony that has been settled in our societies, which requires us to rethink the concept consumption.

García Canclini (2019) states that a sentence such as "the consumption serves to think," which entitles a chapter of *Consumers and citizens* (1997), is no longer feasible to be sustained. Consumption is still not the place for irrationality or the exercise of impulses; however, we moved from the consumption recognized at that moment, as going to a store or the cinema, to that which refers to the access of goods and content available on platforms, on multiple screens. Nowadays, consumption and access serve to think; and feel. Hence the importance of thinking about affections, how their certainties and helplessness are reconfigured before the idea that applications replace institutions. Affections are associated to desires – which trigger reactions against the capital-oriented repression, preventing us from fulfilling them – and beliefs – in leaders, movements, parties; but we are also frustrated in this process of empowerment and loss, and new socioeconomic and political thoughts are undoubtedly built on consumption and access, as well as within their ties and encounters. The author employs two lines of though used to discuss the current condition of citizenship: sociocultural (by a variety of researchers and "rebellion" movements) and biotechnological determinism (Noah Harari).

Although the title of the book and its reading may indicate certain pessimism, García Canclini (2019) offers us solutions and hopes. According to him, three basic tasks are necessary for us to be citizens in this scenario of arising and contradictory questions: to reconstruct a non-dogmatic sense of heterogeneity; recognize that we need to have something to hope for, to desire; and to acknowledge that the contents of that hope, and the ways of achieving it vary, are in undergoing construction, and require rational and demonstrable tests. This takes us back to the 2019 Chile manifestations. It is not strange that younger individuals and retirees fight together, nor that demands are as different as the non-increase of a few cents in the passage fare or the complete change of the national constitution. It consists but of renewing strategies and leaderships, producing bonds, regaining the capacity of believing and hoping in

the face of the arrogance of attempts to control the social, affections, languages, and networks. **M**

REFERENCES
García Canclini, N. (1997). *Consumidores e cidadãos: Conflitos multiculturais da globalização*. Editora UFRJ.

García Canclini, N. (2000). *Culturas híbridas: Estratégias para entrar e sair da modernidade* (3ª ed.). Edusp.

García Canclini, N. (2019). *Ciudadanos reemplazados por algoritmos.* Calas.

Montes, R. (2019a, 21 de outubro). Piñera reage a protestos no Chile: Estamos em guerra. *El País*. https://bit.ly/2Zp6VIx

Montes, R. (2019b, 26 de outubro). Mais de um milhão de pessoas protesta no Chile na maior marcha pós-Pinochet. *El País*. https://bit.ly/2Zltqy2