

An insurgent intellectual adventure

Uma aventura intelectual insurgente

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ABSTRACT

This study summarizes an intellectual autobiography linked to the author's process of training, investigation, and work at the School of Communications and Arts at Universidade de São Paulo during the 1990s. The narration of this intellectual trajectory follows a historiographical exposition and relates epistemological processes with crucial aspects of the author's sociopolitical and cultural life. This study also offers decisive historical contexts for the author's gnoseological, theoretical, and methodological structuring.

Keywords: Intellectual autobiography, Efendy Maldonado, ECA-USP, history, transformation

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RESUMO

Este texto apresenta uma autobiografia intelectual sintética vinculada ao processo de formação, investigação e trabalho do autor na Escola de Comunicações e Artes da Universidade de São Paulo durante a década de 1990. A narrativa dessa trajetória intelectual segue uma linha de exposição historiográfica que pretende relacionar processos epistemológicos com aspectos cruciais da vida sociopolítica e cultural do pensador. Apresentam-se, também, contextos históricos decisivos para a estruturação gnosiológica, teórica e metodológica do pesquisador.

Palavras-chave: Autobiografia intelectual, Efendy Maldonado, ECA-USP, história, transformação

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

MY FIRST EXISTENTIAL VIEWS took place near the Equator, in the Andes, and on beaches in the Pacific, offering our minds memories of collective dances, bathing, mischief, and travel. Thus, we have configured our memory, perceptions, emotions, and pleasures from the age of two and a half. In this dynamic intensity, it was mind-blowing to receive, at the age of four, a book with a drawing of a hummingbird on its cover as a gift so I could learn how to read. It marked an unforgettable literate starting dimension. In fact, it seemed that my mother had guessed I would have a lot of love for reading and a unifying intellectual life since, as she gave me the book, she performed a motivating ritual with tender narratives about the value of reading. This was a decisive and brand-new experience in my then short vital trajectory.

Reading it fascinated me. I learned how to read in just over three months, according to the reports of adults who were part of my surroundings. In this discovery, the fact is that I could mix the adventures and worlds flowing in my mind with the narratives in my first book. I then combined books and comic books, especially *Alma Grande* (Great Soul), the battle name of a Mexican revolutionary, which was manufactured by the publishing industry of that country and came to newsstands every week. I devoured it quickly because it served as a model for our children's battles/games. It was in this entertained intellectual life that the *feeling-thinking* of tropical (cumbia, gaita, vallenato, chachachá, mambo, merengue, son) and romantic music (bolero, tango, pasillo, ballads) constituted a powerful and structuring *musical semiosphere* for an adventurous, daring, subversive, and fraternal thinking/feeling.

Basic education was limiting, although it granted me the possibility of learning elementary reading and writing and proficiency in arithmetical operations. In this process, for me, it was relatively easy to respond to school demands which, in fact, left no important gnosiological, reflexive or existential marks. My memories of this period involve punishments, dull disciplinary frameworks, and confrontations with teachers about what we were taught as the official history of Ecuador. This is because I already had the opportunity to listen and learn, via *oral history*, the teachings of my paternal grandfather, Rafael Maldonado, about the history of my native country and the world. His questioning, humorous, kind, popular, adventurous, irreverent, and open to experimentation historiographic version was crucial to my reflective, questioning, and alternative training. With my grandfather, I learned to question the official history of the winners, to ask for other possibilities of carrying out these processes, and to think about the sociopolitical meaning of events.

He was a sort of alchemist, a chemical researcher, a *self-taught doctor*, a herbalist who had trained himself. In fact, his technical training as a pharmacist did not limit him to the strict field of established formulas: he built an experimental laboratory in the basement of his house in which he produced creams and remedies from his organized study of bibliographies combining phytotherapy, homeopathy, allopathy, cosmetics, and formal organic chemistry. He was an innate and fruitful experimenter. Among other historical facts, it is worth mentioning that, in addition to being loved and appreciated by his patients, at a determined juncture he was called to meet the former President of the Republic José María Velasco Ibarra. My grandfather treated him successfully and an agent offered him a PhD for meritorious knowledge, a concession he refused for not having attended the official medical course. His other scientific curiosities included his talent for producing medicinal creams. His technological competence in this field managed to keep his wife Rosa Herlinda without any wrinkles on her face until she was 93. My grandfather was a sage who taught me about the revolutions in Ecuador between the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, especially the Alfarist Revolution. My affinity with historical epistemology was first foetered in this context.

High school gradually improved the school intellectual environment. Its first two years were frustrating, conflicting, and contradictory due to its conservative Jesuit discipline, which could not frame a dynamic adolescent who did very well in tests and, at the same time, dedicated phases of the school period to meditating and dreaming of larger adventures. These daydreams and speculations joined sports until the late hours of the evening and informal and curious talks on the streets of the neighborhood with adolescents of various origins, profiles, and experiences – a practice closer to popular youth cultures. This curious, exploitative, and playful existence and conversations on the streets, in the local square, and on soccer and basketball fields were configuring problematizing perceptions about the world and society. By coincidence and convenience, my parents bought a house very close to the main public university in the country. This proximity enabled us to come into contact with the discourses and manifestations provoked by authoritarian, inefficient, and corrupt governments. In fact, these experiences decisively marked my trajectory of approaching the critical aspects of sociopolitical and cultural thinking.

It is worth noting the discovery of my mathematical intelligence during adolescence, when I was introduced to algebra by Professor Patricio Pazmiño, who, via fruitful analytical didactics, guided me to the fascination, systematization, discipline, understanding, and exposition of the mathematical

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world. Until then, my educational experience with mathematics had been boring and even torturous since, in my view, it was absurd to have to mechanically repeat operations according to the formal pedagogical rituals of the discipline in the schools at the time. The master enabled me to learn the logic of problems, which exhilarated me. From that moment on, complex abstract thinking strategically excited me. At the same time, the ability to understand, explain, and solve problems led me to discover myself as a teacher and a master since I began to teach algebra and help my colleagues struggling with mathematics after classes. Thus, I realized I had the intelligence to teach, proving that my colleagues learned challenging exercises for the reasoning of an adolescent. This experience definitely marked me for renewing and expanding my personality and intellectual praxis by strongly relating them to the educational field.

High school also offered me the opportunity to acquaint myself with *liberation theology* based on the teachings of a fraction of Jesuits linked to this philosophical-religious approach who came to the institution as teachers. Paulo Freire's perspective and his proposals for a *education for liberation* also came on the scene in my intellectual training during the last three years of high school. Christians' teachings on socialism and currents of various insurgent and traditional lefts also emerged in this context. The circulation of books, magazines, and newspapers on these currents of thought was dynamic, economical, and thought-provoking. This context also included the existence of a good paternal library on the *art of war*, given my father's profession as a military strategist, from whom I learned discipline, strategic thinking, ethics committed to peoples, planning, the will to fight, and the passion for a challenging existence.

University consisted of a space/time of freedom and the formation of consistent, powerful, and emancipatory scientific knowledge. This phase began at the National Polytechnic School of Ecuador, which complemented my physical-mathematical training as a basic science for engineering. In this journey, it was important to strategically break with traditional, formalist, mechanistic, and repetitive learning lines. I came in contact with the scientific revolutions in physics which overcame Newton's paradigm, approached the revolution, and constituted the paradigm inaugurated by Albert Einstein. I received these teachings from one of Richard Feynman's disciples, Bruce Honaiser, and Douglas Moya's inspiring lessons. In mathematics, my conflicting, enlightening, and strengthening dive into linear algebra, differential calculus, and set theory with the great masters Bernard Chevreau and Billy Bosman stood out. Their teachings configured logical fortresses, pedagogical revolutions, and strategic developments in complex theoretical

activities which enhanced young learner Efendy's intellectual capacities, who would combine this intense and demanding training with his work as a college entrance and high school physics and mathematics teacher.

In this polytechnic space, my training in Social and Political Sciences acquired a concrete and advanced epistemological and historical importance. On the one hand, the official polytechnic curriculum included an important set of social and arts disciplines, training in scientific methodology, and the opportunity to carry out activities related to communication. My communication identity and power emerged at Cine Clube Politécnico, the newspaper of the polytechnic students' association, and the Ollantay theater group. Indeed, my affinity with literature, poetry, and narrative exercise, my fascination with cinema, and the discovery of my theatrical talents would intensely and dynamically bring me closer to a definitive historical rupture with the field of physico-mathematical activity. It was a painful, unstable, and strong transition into the field of communication sciences.

This personal history had the fight against the military dictatorship as its sociopolitical context – a combat which arose my oratory, political, organizational, and subversive capacities. The political victory achieved with the fall of the dictatorship and the establishment of a representative democratic regime were a central factor in my transformative perspective on the world. This triumph also included the establishment of the 1978 Constitution (far more advanced than those in the rest of Latin America) whose formulation and approval stemmed from a broad and democratic debate process on two sophisticated and advanced constitutional projects. These facts were decisive in building my political awareness that it was possible and concrete to transform prevailing political models and defeat authoritarianism. Theoretically and methodologically, the political training I received in the nuclei of *the new left* arising from Latin American insurgent processes was categorical. In this process, I mixed the culture of polytechnic study with a praxis and a systematic and consistent critical theoretical research in ballots, movements, and insurgent groups. This is how the various currents of Marxism, anarchism, socialism, and praxis philosophies were enthusiastically studied, debated, and operationalized.

That polytechnic intellectual and political context would also lead me to immerse yourself in Indigenous people and workers' communities in the Pichincha province. In fact, my knowledge about Indigenous wisdoms, tactics, skills, talents, worldviews, and cultures took place in a process of 14 years of learning, transformative experiences, and communication production in which it was important to have found the newspapers *Pluma Pinteña* and

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El Tambor, projects which would achieve a relevant communicative power and a renewing political presence.

In a historical retrospective, it is important to reflect on the *paraconsistent* ways of configuring wisdom and methodological knowledge based on the immersion in cultures and experiences of communicational and artistic work – in the latter field, on Brecht, Buenaventura, Boal, and Stanislavski's theater methods and on the strategies of cinematographic analysis based on Pasolini, Eisenstein, Godard, and Gutiérrez's thoughts/achievements. All this methodological richness would only be used later, when, in epistemological terms, the method became the central problem of my projects.

The shift to communication sciences resulted in the confluence of an existential crisis caused by my distancing from engineering and discovery of structuralist semiology and semantics as an option for instigating and relevant theoretical praxis. The semiotic explosion which generated this event led me to recognize that I could make consistent and valuable science in the field of communication. Then, I entered the communication course at Universidad Central del Ecuador (UCE), a formal academic context in which I built my professions and my knowledge in the field of journalism, audiovisual technologies, public relations, and communication research/planning. In this process, the presence of the International Center of Superior Communication Studies for Latin America (CIESPAL) was decisive for my receiving qualified training with an international perspective because, in fact, the official curriculum of the university was complemented, further developed, and expanded with the courses, activities, projects, and learning enabled by this center.

The communication course at UCE was innovative and established a *research and planning training* which offered integral education with a strong foundation in social and language sciences and the various communication professions. Due to its activity, CIESPAL was crucial to enable the proposed course via its professors, researchers, courses, laboratories, library, and other facilities. Jesús Martín-Barbero's conception of communication as a process, Mattelart/Dorfman/Schmucler's critical thinking, Antonio Pasquali's Frankfurtian line of thought, Daniel Prieto Castillo's message analysis method, the investigative group from American Communication Research – CIESPAL had the best library in Latin America on its references – and Leopoldo Zea, Rodolfo Mario Agoglia, Arturo Andrés Roig, and Néstor García Canclini's conference programs were important sources of masters and guides for my intellectual structuring.

I should highlight the articulating epistemological participation of the great master Rafael Almeida Hidalgo during my time at UCE, a free thinker, historian, anthropologist, and archaeologist who deeply destabilized the formal paradigms of the time, especially Stalinism, positivism, functionalism, and practices of knowledge production, educational work, and formal, traditional, and bureaucratic political making. With his investigative praxis, this unofficial advisor showed me the relevance of articulating dense theoretical research and concrete, committed, careful, and open empirical cultural field research. His voluminous library included versions of the main chronicles on the Spanish conquest, philosophical works from the major critical currents in the world – especially leftist thinking which was unrestricted to Latin American bureaucratic cultures – books of the main anthropological, sociological, legal, economic, historical, and political schools, etc. No demanding critical intellectual would find fault with his collection. In fact, for us, this magnificent theoretical learning laboratory – the master and his library, archaeological collection, field outings, social gatherings, soirees, and Sunday lunches – was an educational environment which inspired and strengthened our intellectual perspective.

This set of knowledge, methodologies, philosophies, and praxis configured a cognitive state of challenging and destabilizing complexity. On the one hand, the convenience and certainties of the structural/functionalist paradigm were presented with its efficient, operational, and financial processes and practical, periodic, and concrete results. In fact, my immersion in the Investigative Operative Marketing (Markop) commercial research institute (which produced macro data on the national socioeconomic reality and quantitative commercial research) enabled me to learn and recognize the potentialities and limitations of commercial operational research. On the other hand, the great philosophical, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological challenges I faced made me choose to produce a strategic research which would articulate my constitution as a communication researcher.

My Geopolítica da Difusão Internacional nos Grandes Jornais de Equador... (Geopolitics of International Diffusion in Large Ecuadorian Newspapers...) (Maldonado, 1991) was a project which aimed to investigate the universe of journalistic production for three years, an ambition which failed by the amount of material I collected, making it impossible to work in individual terms and with the concrete resources of the time. After two years of research, I decided to make a necessary clipping, conforming a sample of international information on Central American conflicts in the 1980s in major Ecuadorian

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newspapers. I configured a quantitative-qualitative methodology combining message analysis, journalistic historical research in the main journal archives, collection and photocopying of journalistic products, statistical systematization, social economic research on the central American reality, field work via video and audio interviews in war territories, and drawing of analysis tables which included variables (major themes) and subvariables (themes). More than 20,000 units of information were processed, and an *interpretative analysis* was finally carried out and expressed in more than 1,000 pages of arguments about the strategies and journalistic productions of the alliance between transnational (news agencies) and the major oligarchic newspapers in the country.

This research mediated and connected the School of Communications and Arts at Universidade de São Paulo (ECA-USP) since I submitted a proposal to study for my master's degree in Brazil via an agreement with the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes). Several important universities accepted my request, but by consulting with Brazilian colleagues who worked in Ecuador, especially with Professor Elson Faxina — who promoted my moving to Brazil —, I chose to continue the entrance process in the Graduate Program (PPG) in Communication Sciences at ECA. I should note that, in this process, Professor Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes' decision to select me as a master's student was crucial. I think that the methodological emphasis of my proposal and its Latin American focus were important for my approval, which would soon lead to establishing a strategic, invaluable, and powerful investigative work link between us.

LIFE AT ECA-USP

My immersion in ECA was an intense, dynamic, deconstructing, transformative, and inventive process. Focusing on epistemological and methodological disciplines enabled the confluence of intellectual, theoretical, existential, and institutional efforts which, in turn, provided a hard-working, painful, exciting, visualizing, and fruitful procedural adaptation. My advisor's demands to deliver weekly reports on my work enabled me to continuously reflect on my master's degree and accelerated the improvement of my proficiency in Brazilian Portuguese.

The dense, voluminous, and enlightening arguments guided by the administered disciplines opened unknown fields of study and showed a diversity of valuable, consistent, and renewing theoretical options. This process forced me to carry out a profound and broad epistemological personal transformation

so that I could already consider myself an integrated member of the ECA culture in its diversity and heterogeneity by the end of the first semester. Her advice that I should participate in classes from various departments was key, and the selection of the professors responsible for them was right and important since they combined demands and advanced theoretical training, epistemological openness, and a critical renewal of paradigms, theoretical referents, and methodological models. The productive, intense, transformative, and dynamic intellectual environment which is characteristic of the life in São Paulo fascinated me from the second semester onward. In this trajectory, my theoretical-methodological experimentation expanded to the whole of USP and I began to participate in seminars, conferences, and disciplines in various faculties, especially in philosophy and social and polytechnic sciences. The laboratories open 24 hours in the Polytechnic school at USP enabled me to make better use of my time and work at night and the early hours of the morning. The fact that lacking a personal computer was common – especially among students in the Residential Complex of the University of São Paulo (CRUSP) who depended on faculty laboratories – until, after several efforts, requests, and negotiations, we obtained a small laboratory for the residential complex.

Being a student with few financial resources forced me to formulate and articulate various activities and processes to meet the limitations to which I was conditioned and establish relationships with the Brazilian Journal of Latin American Studies (Prolam), rectory cultural projects, the union, and the Central Directory of Students (DC), leading others and I to organize the *Comitê de Estudantes Latino-Americanos da USP* (USP Committee of Latin American Students - Cela-USP). These actions enabled us to contact all areas of knowledge and we promoted cycles of conferences, debates, and studies on Latin America and Africa and important cultural dance, theater, cinema, and political articulation events at the *hives* (modules for support and culture activities at USP) and Crusp.

Our intensive and dynamic learning was also built in these existential spaces of the university; we experience USP deeply, with dedication, commitment, openness, and democratizing actions. The struggle for housing has linked me to important intellectuals, fighters from Brazil, Latin America, and Africa. Our efforts expanded the rights to housing in the university for women with children and hundreds of students from all over Brazil who were unable to study without this support. The collective love of these people welcomed us for many years, even when we had already moved to other horizons.

ECA has alluringly, vigorously, and comprehensively absorbed us in an investigative praxis; the integrated project *Ficção Seriada/Brasil na Telenovela*

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a Telenovela no Brasil (Serial Fiction/Brazil in Telenovelas Telenovela in Brazil) articulated the work of most research groups in the communication department and promoted a collective process of producing powerful and renewing knowledge. Its meetings on methodological reflection, establishment of general lines of investigative practice, and definition of problems were deeply enlightening and invigorating. We learned to work in a collective of dozens of researchers and aggregately built our particularity in *research on reception* by expanding the participating groups to other universities in São Paulo (Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo e Universidade do Estado de São Paulo). Articulating, coordinating, and carrying out this project was Professor Immacolata's great success. She knew how to operationalize complex studies fruitfully, methodically, and productively with dozens of researchers. I was responsible for coordinating fieldwork at the São Remo *Favela*, a strengthening, inspiring, and renewing process of our experience of working with citizens from subaltern classes. Empirical research had a methodological theoretical basis which combined the knowledge of various groups/universities, research cultures, and theoretical references in a committed, supportive, dialogical, and fertile way. Such investigative action functioned as the starting point of the *transmethodological* approach we later constituted.

ECA was the perfect scientific environment to develop my thesis *Pesquisa Teórica em Comunicação na América Latina...* (Theoretical Research in Communication in Latin America...) (Maldonado, 1999) due to the freedom to work on exploring, knowing, testing, and researching in combination with strategic guidelines on investigative paths. These were the academic-scientific factors which enabled me to develop an enlightening *historical documentary* research on the theoretical production in communication between the 1960s and 1990s in the region. While I drafted my thesis, digitalization was at its beginnings, so having libraries and physical materials was indispensable. Thus, the library at ECA was a privileged center for searches, together with those dedicated to the Social Sciences and Philosophy. Simultaneously, ECA was an articulating center of scientific societies, such as the Brazilian Society on Interdisciplinary Studies on Communication and the Latin American Free Trade Association, which enabled us to establish contacts, meet thinkers, take advantage of international events, and opt for the paths we considered fruitful.

My *exploratory documentary research* showed me the need to conduct in-depth *theoretical research* with the authors I considered important for the problem given the power of their arguments, the epistemological

complexity of their productions, the scientific recognition of the region, their structuring as reference thinkers/researchers, and their configuration as theorists who constituted a renewing, strategic, and critical thought in Latin America. The partnership with my advisor, her methodological vigor, clarity in understanding my research problem, and organizational capacity enabled me to conduct *field research* with the paradigmatic Eliseo Verón, Armand Mattelart, and Jesús Martín-Barbero. To this end, I drew up a plan of meetings, conversations, trips, seminars, conferences, and *intellectual life history* interviews with these great masters. This mind-blowing experience enabled us to personally know these theorists, directly receive their teachings, clarify issues which can hardly be included only in their books and articles, understand the complexity of their psychological configuration, and integrally and comprehensively visualize the factors which made them founders of critical aspects of communication theories in Latin America. The subsequent recognition I received from these great masters strategically enhanced me in my professional, intellectual, and investigative career.

At ECA, I met and learned what it is like to organize vigorous, productive, and committed research groups. I discovered and built my work capacity in international academic and scientific cooperation relationships. I structured key relationships in the field of communication in Brazil and Latin America. I renewed and enhanced my configuration as a thinker and researcher. I developed and rediscovered the methodological dimension, learned from my advisor the need to formulate multimethodological strategies for communication research, which were the basis of our subsequent *transmethodological* formulations and led me to develop lines of research which would later achieve the maximum recognition of international excellence in Brazil and Latin America.

I must highlight the partners who followed and strengthened my path at ECA, guiding and mediating the process. First, I would like to thank Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes, who chose me to come to Brazil, guided me, and was a solidary, strong, and indispensable partnership on this journey; Cremilda Medina, who knew how to intelligently, affectionately, and powerfully recognize my intellectual configuration and provoked a profound epistemological crisis in my theoretical frameworks; João Aloísio Lopes, a master and friend, who quickly understood my Latin American condition, improved my academic working situation, supported me, and guided me in key decisions in my journey; Professor Maria Aparecida Baccega since the strength of her critical thinking knew how to question and

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problematize formalist theoretical aspects – which I kept in my arguments – and established the necessary conditions for our research groups to be strengthened and fruitful. I also would like to thank Adilson Citelli for his support and partnership in my diving and learning process in the Brazilian Portuguese language and in the field of educommunication. Luiz Roberto Alves for opening my theoretical field to Mikhail Bakhtin’s approach and to important theorists in Brazilian letters. To the great masters Octavio Ianni and Milton Santos for invading my intellectual field with the wisdom and strength of their theoretical production and showing me the quality, vigor, and importance of investigative production in Social Sciences in Brazil. To partners, comrades, and friends Jiani Adriana Bonin and Roseli Figaro, study companions at ECA, with whom I continue to develop projects, activities, networks, and transformations.

Finally, I should emphasize the richness and complexity of a school which has been the inaugural historical cradle of scientific-academic research in communication in Brazil. In fact, during the first 25 years of field history in the country, when we participated in this fruitful and strategic process, ECA cemented, established, and continued an innovative scientific field in Latin America. His research production has been central to forming a consistent, promising, productive, and critical academic field. The PhDs training at the School are in all regions of Brazil and have generated processes of structuring programs, communities, networks, and projects which are relevant and necessary to develop the scientific field in communication of the country. I am a son of this generating process; I love and recognize my history at ECA as an “intellectual space platform for the cosmic launch” to the world of producing transcendental and critical knowledge in communication. The configuration of my *transmethodological* critical epistemological conception had the School as an incubator of fruitful knowledge. For current and new generations of students, professors, and researchers who make up ECA, it is important to promote and renew historical-critical reflections on the institution itself, its brilliant and necessary pasts, and the need to enhance futures of excellence committing themselves to the peoples of Brazil, Latin America, and the world. ■

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