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## The Intellectual Impasse of Cultural Studies of the Media in Latin America: How to Move Forward

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### **Abstract**

This paper revisits the intellectual development of cultural studies in Latin America in order to assess current challenges and identify lines of research. It is argued that much of the literature has failed to seriously consider key points of cultural studies, namely, the need to be critical about its own epistemological premises and the need to study culture within broad social formations. Since the landmark studies by Néstor García Canclini and Jesús Martín Barbero laid the foundations in the 1980s, the field of cultural studies has generally aimed to illustrate original arguments instead of using them as a point of departure to analyze media and cultural phenomena. Consequently, many scholars have produced work that while it proves and illustrates original arguments about the hybrid nature of cultures and the complexity of cultural mediation, it does not push the field in new theoretical directions. An additional problem is that, often, the study of culture has been divorced from a close inspection of the linkages between cultural, political, and economic processes, and from the articulations between high and low culture. Consequently, the political underpinnings of the enterprise of cultural studies, as outlined by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, have been in the background. This choice has, arguably, restrained the intellectual development and undermined the potential to move theory-building and the debate forward. Additionally, the disinterest in critically exploring theoretical premises has diminished the potential to transcend the boundaries of “area studies” in order to engage with the study of media and culture as well as cultural studies globally. The paper concludes by suggesting research directions that might contribute to overcoming the current intellectual impasse.

**Keywords:** Cultural Studies, Latin America, culturalist theory, intellectual impasse.

### **Introduction: Media and Culture in Communication Studies in Latin America**

The study of culture has been an ongoing concern of media and communication studies in Latin America since the 1960s and early 1970s. During that period, the foundation of landmark journals (e.g. *Comunicación y Cultura*, *Los Libros*, *Lenguajes*), the establishment of departments of communication in selected universities, and the regular offering of communication courses across academic units (particularly in sociology and literature) in the region were important steps towards the institutionalization of communication studies (de Melo, 1993; Galindo Caceres, 2004). The absence of hard boundaries between the analysis of (mass) communication and culture was evident from the beginning. Unlike the field of communication in the United States which has traditionally included a wider range of areas (from interpersonal to organizational communication), communication research in Latin America almost exclusively focused on mass communication, namely, media industries and content. The study of the mass media was assumed to be central to understand cultural processes in contemporary societies.

While media was the purview of media studies, 'literary works' were within the scope of national literature departments in Latin America, and Spanish departments in the United States. By the late 1980s, the crystallization of Latin American cultural studies in academic institutions in the United States opened up the study of the media to scholars who had until then focused mainly on lettered culture. Latin American cultural studies, an idiosyncratic heir to the tradition of British cultural studies, made the study of culture a space where scholars trained in different disciplines scrambled for the same objects of study with different analytical tools. A shared bibliography – that includes texts from the Frankfurt School, School of Birmingham cultural studies, French post-structuralism, and prominently the works of Gramsci and Althusser – came together in the late 1980s with the publication of *Culturas híbridas* by Néstor García Canclini (2001 [1989]) and *De los medios a las mediaciones* by Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987).

This article revisits the intellectual development of Latin American media cultural studies (LAMCS) in order to assess current challenges and identify lines of research. What we refer to as LAMCS is a diverse body of work produced since the late 1980s that focuses on the media in the region and situates itself very clearly within the framework outlined by the work of García Canclini and Martín-Barbero. We show that while LAMCS is a contact zone for scholars trained in a variety of disciplines – prominently literature and anthropology – for scholars in media/communication it has become the dominant area of study to the point that it has sidelined other issues.

Latin American media studies and Latin American cultural studies are both relatively new intellectual endeavours that grew out of a more general critique of capitalism and state terrorism. While cultural studies spurred important debates in literary studies in the 1980s, and left an indelible mark on how lettered culture is read, literary critics involved in cultural studies often retreat into their own disciplinary practices and objects of study. In the area of media/communication, however, cultural studies has become the dominant paradigm ultimately turning the study of communication into the study of cultural practices loosely related to the media. As a consequence, LAMCS has become insular, largely removed from major debates in the field of media studies/communication. By focusing on culture rather than media/communication, it has failed to come through with nuanced analysis about pressing questions regarding the media in the region. Furthermore, much of the literature has failed to seriously engage with two of the theoretical premises of cultural studies, namely, the need to be critical about its own epistemological premises and the need to study culture within broad social formations. Also, LAMCS has generally aimed to illustrate original arguments instead of using them as a point of departure to analyse media and cultural phenomena. Consequently, many scholars have produced work that, while it proves and illustrates original arguments about the hybrid nature of cultures and the complexity of cultural mediation, does not push the field in new theoretical directions. An additional problem is that, often,

the study of culture has been divorced from a close inspection of the linkages between cultural, political and economic processes, and from the articulations between high and low culture. This choice, arguably, has restrained the intellectual development of the field, and undermined the potential to move theory-building, and the debate, forward. Additionally, the lack of interest in critically exploring theoretical premises has diminished the potential to transcend the boundaries of 'area studies' in order to engage with the study of media and culture as well as cultural studies globally.

In this article we claim that while cultural studies provided literary critics with a wider net from which to draw objects of study and exemplify the relationship between culture and society, media studies came to be defined by a narrow understanding of cultural studies that ultimately became a straitjacket that hindered theoretical and methodological advancement. This has not only blurred disciplinary borders and weakened some of the specific theoretical spaces of these fields but – perhaps of more concern – has disarmed the creative and subversive possibilities of cultural studies. While literary critics came to cultural studies through a process of democratization of elite culture, in media studies culture became an umbrella term to talk about the media, particularly in the context of globalization. In the rest of the article we draw a genealogy of media studies and cultural studies in Latin America in order to propose a cartography of their contact and to highlight what we see as the shortcomings of the current deployments of both cultural and media studies. We conclude with a series of suggestions for further research.

### **Media Studies in Latin America**

The study of mass communication and culture in Latin America has been historically informed by theories that did not set out to specifically interrogate or explain communication issues. This focus resulted from the fact that the study of mass communication (or 'social communication' as the field is still commonly known in the region) broke away from disciplines primarily concerned with understanding

communication and cultural phenomena in capitalism and mass societies. Theories grounded in philosophy, sociology and literary criticism originally outlined the conceptual boundaries and laid out central questions for early communication research. Consequently, communication studies were inseparable from broad debates in the humanities and social sciences about culture and mass society, the place of art in capitalist societies, and the links between language and power.

Amidst the political effervescence of leftist politics in Latin America, particularly in university campuses, research on communication and culture was not driven chiefly by theoretical questions or interest in advancing scientific knowledge. Political and ideological considerations played a crucial role. Communication and cultural research, just like research in the humanities and social sciences in general, was largely conceived of as an intellectual enterprise inseparable from the critique of capitalism and power relations in the region. The widespread censorship during authoritarian regimes in the region in the 1960s and 1970s further marked research on mass communication and culture as urgent and political, and aligned academic work with political activism.

The imprint of leftist politics on theories about media/cultural dependency and semiotics, the two conceptual frameworks that dominated communication/media studies in the late 1960s and 1970s, is evident. Latin American scholars played a central role in the development of media/cultural dependency theories, which proposed that media systems fundamentally operate as agencies for the reproduction of capitalist socio-economic and political relations, nationally and internationally. This argument was in line with core ideas of dependency theories that influenced scholarly research in a range of fields (from economics to anthropology) in the region at the time. Media dependentismo argued that the structure and content of media systems (television, radio and newspapers) both reflected and contributed to the maintenance of power relations. Combining Marxist insights with the pessimistic diagnosis of mass society by the Frankfurt School, it

concluded that media systems supported power relations under capitalism and obliterated critical thinking. Classic dependency studies painstakingly dissected ownership patterns and the links between media systems and dominant political and economic structures (Beltrán and Fox de Cardona, 1980; Pasquali, 1972). In a region historically dominated by commercial media, the interests of media owners were inseparable from capitalist structures and concentrated business groups that controlled key economic sectors. Such patterns were closely linked to global capitalist relations underpinning the historical development of Latin America as a region dependent on the Western core.

Grounded in arguments about the functional role of mass communication in peripheral capitalism, cultural dependentismo proposed that media systems were vehicles for the propagation of ideas that reinforced power relations. Imbued by Marxist notions about the role of the superstructure in the perpetuation of class structures, several studies argued that media industries performed key roles in anchoring and legitimizing the status quo. By spreading ideas that celebrated individualism and market principles, they provided the necessary cultural glue for the affirmation of a neocolonial order. Media content dominated by Western (mostly US) news and programming, coupled with the systematic exclusion of anti-capitalist voices, led to the conceptualization of media systems as vehicles for the transmission of foreign values and imperialist relationships.

Dependentismo was not only premised on Marxist concepts, it was also unmistakably structuralist. It assumed that media-cultural systems are closely articulated with the fundamental capitalist dynamics, and ultimately determine social relations. It viewed media and cultural industries through an orthodox structuralist reading of key Marxist texts that negated the possibility of individual agency. Louis Althusser's (2001 [1972]) concept of 'ideological state apparatus' offered basic conceptual foundations for the analysis of media and cultural processes. The idea that the media as a central ideological state apparatus under

capitalism serve ideological functions and close off the possibilities of criticism is the backbone of dependentismo. Together with economic and political structures, ideological practice forms a tightly closed social formation that is imposed upon individuals.

Similar theoretical underpinnings were present in semiotic analyses of media and culture that were prevalent in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Latin American researchers wholeheartedly embraced critical semiotics influenced by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and other French scholars, most notably, Roland Barthes (1972 [1957]) and Christian Metz. Numerous studies examined the linguistic constructions underlying popular texts as well as their linkages to capitalist domination (Pignatari, 1974; Schmucler, 1997 Verón, 1969). From a critical perspective, the value of semiotics was to provide a conceptual framework and research methodology to unpack the ideological dimensions of media texts in mass and popular culture. Unquestionably, Armand Mattelart and Ariel Dorfman's (1972) classic *How to Read Donald Duck* stands as the most pre-eminent example of this tradition. It plainly stated the idea that textual analysis grounded in the principles of semiotics was indispensable to unmask capitalist ideology embedded in the media. In tune with Althusserian theory and its psychoanalytic premises, Marxist semiotics assumed the possibility of conducting 'symptomatic readings' of texts and other cultural signs to reveal deep structures and meanings. Given the dominant presence of the media in the production of mass culture, communication studies had to focus on popular media texts. The underlying ideological premises in support of capitalism's socio-economic and political order could be revealed through a detailed analysis of textual structures.

The purpose of this summary is to highlight how this particular genealogy defined the field in three critical ways: by aligning the study of the media with the study of

culture, by stressing a binary opposition between cultures, and by drawing heavily from the toolbox of structuralism.<sup>1</sup>

Media dependency and semiotics shared the conviction that the media was a central locus for cultural production in modern societies. While neither went as far as to subsume 'culture' within 'media culture', they implicitly assumed that the rise of the mass media, and the concomitant commercialization and industrialization of culture, overshadowed other forms of cultural production and consumption. Rarely did scholars pay attention to folk cultures or other cultural expressions that did not undergo the process of massification and commercialization. From cartoons to print news to films to advertising, mass-produced cultural forms were the dominant culture in late capitalism.

Also, dependentismo and Barthesian semiotics subscribed to a dichotomous view of culture. Media/cultural dependency established a seemingly irreconcilable opposition between local and foreign, bourgeois and anti-capitalist, materialistic and socialistic cultures. It uncritically assumed the existence of local and/or national cultures that stood in clear opposition to imported, media cultures, or the celebration of bourgeois virtues that represented capitalist ideals and morals. Rather than mapping possible points of intersection among cultures, it assumed an essentialist position that located cultures on a shared a geographical-political territory (the nation-state) or according to class belonging. Cultures were understood as existing separately from each other instead of in contact and in flux. The spread of Western mediated cultures in Latin America was viewed in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive genealogy would be incomplete without analysing other traditions that were critical in the development of communication/cultural studies in Latin America, namely, the study and practice of journalism spearheaded by the CIESPAL in the 1960s, the development of the tradition of 'participatory communication,' and Paulo Freire's (2000) immensely influential ideas about 'critical consciousness.' Because none of these traditions played a decisive role in the intellectual lineage of contemporary communication/cultural research, they are not discussed here.



the clash between two distinct and opposite cultures driven by the expansionist forces of capitalism.

Media/cultural studies rode the same intellectual trend that catapulted structuralism, particularly in its Marxist variant, to a dominant position in the humanities and social sciences. With Althusser as its theoretical foundation, media/cultural structuralism argued that capitalist ideology interpellates individuals and thereby constitutes them as subjects. Media systems, characterized by high levels of transnationalization and complicity with oligarchic interests, defined capitalist ideas and identities. Althusser's core notions provided the conceptual backbone for media and cultural research identified with dependentismo and semiotics, namely, the material existence of ideology and ideology as the imaginary relationship that individuals have with real conditions. It was widely assumed that ideological structures effectively determine individual consciousness and blunt critical thought.

### **From Structuralism to Cultural Practices**

The study of media/communication and culture in Latin America experienced a monumental shift in the late 1980s with the publication of Jesus Martín-Barbero's *De los medios a las mediaciones* (1987) and Nestor García Canclini's *Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (2001). Martín-Barbero and García Canclini chartered a new analytical course by critically tackling previously dominant studies of communication and culture in the region. Within cultural studies, the works of Martín-Barbero and García Canclini signalled a move away from high culture and into popular and mass culture for literary scholars who, until then, had focused mostly on lettered culture; the works of these authors functioned as bridges between cultural studies and media studies, mostly because they became a shared reading rather than because they spurred a dialogue between scholars in both fields.

It is important to stress that neither Martín-Barbero nor García Canclini wrote as 'media scholars', primarily concerned with understanding mass media or culture in the tradition of communication scholarship. Instead, they set out to examine the condition of 'peripheral modernity' of Latin America. Their arguments about communication, media and culture are inscribed in their overall efforts to analyse Latin America's unique path into modernity. Cultural analysis, they argue, reveals the blindspots of conventional accounts of modernity produced in the West. The vitality of oral communication amidst the presumed domination of written culture, the topsy-turvy unfolding of cultural production, and the centrality of the mass media in the political incorporation of popular classes in the region suggest a unique cultural modernity. There has not been, nor should we expect, as modernization theorists optimistically predicted, a linear, universal process that necessarily mirrors the course of European modernity. Nor should we identify modernity narrowly with the experience of a handful of Western countries, as many mainstream critics did. Instead, the cultural history of Latin America attests to the multiple paths of modernity, the de-centredness of global capitalism, the overlapping presence of plural forms of communication and the fragmentation of cultural experience. Before such arguments became core convictions of postmodernism and fashionable intellectual concepts, the region's cultural history shows the limitations of modernist discourses that envisioned a straight development path and trumpeted the unstoppable march of rationality. The dynamic presence of myriad cultures straddling developmental cleavages challenges notions about a perfect correspondence between culture and certain temporal-historical stages ('modern culture'). A reflection about modernity 'from the South', as both authors contended, reveals the profound limitations of the philosophical edifice of rational modernism. The analysis of Latin America's cultural history provided evidence to question three core premises of structuralist approaches: the centrality of the media in contemporary processes of cultural production; essentialist and dichotomous conceptualizations of culture; and the power of media and cultural structures on consciousness and identity.

Martín-Barbero and García Canclini found media-centred research too narrow to study cultural processes adequately. They proposed that culture should be analysed as a set of practices in concrete settings of production and consumption. Rather than starting with media production or focusing on the underlying meanings of media texts, cultural analysts needed to consider the integration of media content in the creation and re-creation of cultural identities. In line with anthropological approaches concerned with the practice of culture, they advocated studies grounded in specific historical-political contexts, rather than the kind of literal exegesis of cultural works and aesthetics that predominated in previous studies. In Martín-Barbero's famous expression, the analytical focus had to shift from 'the media' to 'cultural mediations'. His long-term interest in the popular uses of telenovelas in Colombia, as well as García Canclini's (1982) meticulous ethnographic research on popular/indigenous cultures in Mexico reflected this turn away from media-centred research.

Martín-Barbero and García Canclini also questioned essentialist and dichotomous conceptualizations of culture that were evident in Althusserian structuralism, dependency theories and pessimistic analyses informed by Horkheimer and Adorno's ideas. These approaches perpetuated a dual view of culture, such as Althusser's distinction between ideology and science, dependentismo's division between 'national' and 'foreign' cultures, Umberto Eco's options between 'integrated' and 'apocalyptic', and the Frankfurt School's view of 'high art' and 'cultural industries'. Dualistic categories not only ignored the dynamic process of appropriation and transformation that characterizes cultural formations, they also uncritically assumed, and thus reified, cultural differences that weren't present in actual practices. The study of people's everyday life suggested, instead, the permanent combination of cultural expressions that didn't fit conventional dualistic categories. A range of cultural practices showed the miscegenic character of culture. 'Indigenous' crafts, museums, 'folk art,' religious ceremonies and rock music, for

example, reflect the constant mixing of cultural traditions that elude dyadic classifications that readily attribute certain essences. The open process of cultural (re)production cannot be grasped from perspectives anchored in modern rationalism or arbitrary taste judgements. Binary categories and solid hierarchies disregard the state of conflict and contradiction that characterizes cultural practices. To draw neat borders across cultures is to profoundly misunderstand the dynamism, fluidity and hybridity of culture. Cultural hybridity should not be viewed either as a characteristic of contemporary cultural formations or the manifestation of postmodernity. Rather, hybridity has historically defined the region's cultural landscape for centuries.

Furthermore, Martín-Barbero and García Canclini questioned structuralist arguments that assumed the power of media and cultural formations in relation to consciousness and identity. The 'power of the media', which had been a central concern for media studies since its beginnings in the 1920s, was eschewed in favour of questions that integrate media production and consumption within the study of cultural practices. This analytical switch moved communication research from issues about consciousness in modernity and capitalism to the formation of cultural identities. The former was central to approaches informed by insights from Marxism and the Frankfurt School interested in exploring the links between capitalism, ideological industries and rationality. The latter, instead, focused on how social identities evolve in interaction with cultural processes at large. The focus was no longer on strategies of media domination and the presumed repression of critical consciousness, but rather on the phenomenology of identity-making practices.

Martín-Barbero's and García Canclini's intellectual ambitions surpassed communication scholarship. Oftentimes, their work has been narrowly interpreted as the studies that spearheaded the study of media reception and 'active' audiences in Latin America. Certainly, their arguments eventually dovetailed with others that stressed the polysemic nature of media texts and produced trenchant critiques of

the 'dominant ideology' thesis found in structuralist approaches. Yet neither Martín-Barbero nor García Canclini were primarily interested in challenging theories about 'powerful media effects' or demonstrating the creativity and resilience of media audiences. Rather, they engaged with philosophical and cultural interpretations of modernity.

Neither Martín-Barbero's nor García Canclini's studies were anchored in traditional media studies, nor did they primarily draw from communication theories. Instead, philosophy and anthropology, respectively, provided the theoretical scaffolding and questions. For example, Martín-Barbero's interest in the power of language to articulate sense-making narratives and collective identities was stimulated by Ricoeur's hermeneutics. This approach definitely broke away with the tradition of structural semiotics that viewed language as a set of embedded structures and signs. Also perceptible was the influence of literary theories (Bakhtin) and studies on narratives as 'lived languages' that integrate discourses with different origins (e.g. popular, mass, mediated) was perceptible. Likewise, E.P. Thompson's analysis of popular/working-class cultures in historical contexts underpinned his interest in the study of everyday cultural experiences and manifestations. García Canclini's intervention is part of a long-standing debate within American cultural and literary studies that grappled with notions of *mestizaje* (Vasconcelos), transculturation (Rama), heterogeneity (Cornejo Polar) and contact zones (Pratt). García Canclini's main contribution to this debate within cultural studies is the articulation of the relationship between hybridity and modernity. His attention to the market as articulator of identities in globalization produced a major shift in studies of culture, moving the debate away from aesthetics into studies of audience reception and identity formation.

While it is unquestionable that they broke new ground, the writings of Martín-Barbero and García Canclini were symptomatic of significant changes in the intellectual *Zeitgeist* in Latin America. After the heyday of Marxist structuralism in

the early 1970s, political and intellectual developments brought important changes in the study of communication and culture in the region during the 1980s. Both the intellectual horizons as well as the conditions of academic production went through important transformations. The insurrectionary and radical traditions that permeated national politics and academic production were violently suppressed by the authoritarian regimes that came to power in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> A decade later, the transition to liberal democracy pushed forward new issues in the agenda of media and cultural studies, such as communication and civil society, the emergence of new social actors (e.g. human rights movements, youth cultures, feminist groups), urban cultures and memory studies. By then, Marxist structuralism as well as Leninist and Maoist writings had lost much of their past influence on scholarship and university politics. In post-authoritarian Latin America, the ideological boundaries of *dependentismo* and structuralism seemed too confining to study media and culture in new democracies. With a few exceptions (the work of Antonio Gramsci being the most glaring, a point to which we will return), the Marxist theoretical edifice seemed largely unsuitable, or at best too narrow, to study the democratic politics of mass communication and culture, and a crop of novel subjects. The emergence of a new academic sensitivity, concerned with reassessing media and democratic politics and understanding popular and participatory communication in capitalist societies, was perceptible.

Simultaneously, intellectual debates in the West provided new theoretical directions and questions. Most notably, French post-structuralism (particularly the work of Pierre Bourdieu), hermeneutics, pragmatism and social constructionism offered

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<sup>2</sup> By 1976, all countries in the sub-region were under authoritarian regimes that set out to radically change academic life as part of their overall strategy to obliterate leftist politics. Scholars such as Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart in Chile, and Héctor Schmucler in Argentina went into exile. The critical study of mass communication and culture in the Southern Cone, the site of vibrant debates a few years earlier, virtually ceased. By the late 1970s, Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia, the only countries with stable democracies in the region, gradually became the centres for new trends in the study of communication and culture.

fresh perspectives for the study of communication and culture. These theories contributed to the renewal of communication/cultural studies during the 1980s by showing the limitations of structuralism in studying the richness of communication and cultural processes. In retrospect, structuralism had to be critically overhauled, if not completely transcended, in order for communication/cultural studies in Latin America to probe old models and ask new questions.

Because it was basically interested in understanding processes of ideological reproduction, structuralism was flat-footed, functionalist and could not account for the dynamic, unpredictable and conflictive nature of communication and culture. One glaring omission was its failure to examine resistance and dissonance. It assumed the existence of communication totalities articulated with broader systems, precluding the possibility of counter-actions that challenged dominant meanings. It offered few guidelines to comprehend the vitality and complexity of popular cultures, as well as cultural expressions that fell outside the ideological state apparatuses. It did not provide any theoretical insights to understand the nuances of domination and change that characterized Latin American cultural formations. Such gaps could be explained by the fact that structuralism negated the role of human agency in communication/cultural processes and instead attributed all meanings to subjacent structures that determined individual identity.

The disenchantment with structuralism was not simply driven by intellectual innovations. Developments in media systems in the region also raised questions about the adequacy of media/cultural dependency to fully capture the complexity of communication and cultural processes in Latin America. The growth of domestic media industries, particularly in Mexico, Brazil and Argentina in the 1950s, suggested that media dependency painted the region with a broad brush. Latin America was not just the destination of Hollywood exports, the neighbouring market for dumping canned programmes, movies and formats. Various studies documented the diversity of musical production, the continuous output of film-

making industries, the appeal of domestic television shows (particularly telenovelas) and the popularity of local radio. The volume and appeal of domestic media content made it necessary to rethink old categories and arguments about the nature of popular culture and the relationship between culture, social formations and identities articulated by class, gender, races and ethnicity. Unquestionably, media industries were not exactly a model of democratic communication that offered similar opportunities to all citizens and cultural expressions. Rampant commercialism and the dominant urban orientation of the largest media constrain the potential for the expression of a wide range of interests.

### **Three Shifts**

The impact of Martín-Barbero and García Canclini has been extraordinary in Latin America. Aside from their influence on scholarship elsewhere (e.g. Jackson, 2008; Kraidy, 2005), they laid the theoretical foundations for scores of studies in the region. Their groundbreaking work has spearheaded three shifts: a move away from Marxism, a turn from the analysis of mass communication and media towards the study of culture, and a conception of culture as hybrid.

The first shift has been the move away from Marxism towards critical multiculturalism. Whereas progressive politics largely inform contemporary academic production, they are markedly different from the past. They are neither consistently articulated with a political project nor do they embrace a socialist vision of cultural politics. Instead, they are loosely associated with efforts to strengthen the recognition of cultural diversity and minorities in official policies, and the critique of market policies and media industries for subjecting cultural production exclusively to commercial considerations.

Given these characteristics, current scholarship in Latin America is not anchored on the same politics that originally grounded the Birmingham tradition of cultural studies. Founded on the work of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall,



this tradition was markedly driven by leftist politics inscribed in neo-Marxism, which was visible, for example, in landmark studies that approached working-class/subaltern cultures as expressions of resistance and opposition to capitalism and market policies (Gilroy, 1987; Hebdige, 1979). Neither these issues nor perspectives have been at the forefront of critical studies of culture and media in Latin America. A telling example of this difference is the ‘uses of Gramsci’ (Portantiero, 1977) in Latin America. Gramsci, the theorist of political revolution, has been largely used as a theorist of culture to dissect the dynamics of cultural practices and domination. References to Gramsci are common in cultural and media studies in Latin America, yet the analysis has rarely been linked to core themes in Gramsci, such as class-based hegemony, the role of organic intellectuals and revolution. The evisceration of the Marxist-Leninist politics in Gramsci’s work, and the transmutation of his action-driven categories into analytical tools are another stage in the long evolution of Gramsci in the political and intellectual life of the region (Aricó, 1988; Burgos, 2004; Portantiero, 1977). Consequently, Latin American scholarship was familiar with core Gramscian insights before the ‘turn to Gramsci’ in the social sciences and humanities in the 1970s. A ‘turn away’ from the core Marxist underpinnings and political implications of his writings took place amidst the renewal of intellectual debates in the 1980s.

This shift is evident in both Martín-Barbero and García Canclini. In their work, the value of Gramsci resides in his thoughts about the cultures of subaltern classes, which departed from traditional Marxism and avoided the economicism underlying the division between ‘economic base’ and ‘cultural superstructure’, avoided dualistic notions of culture, and critically assessed arguments about ‘false consciousness’. A thinker deeply sensitive to revolutionary politics in the European periphery, Gramsci had an appeal for Latin American academics interested in modernity and cultural processes outside the West. Yet Gramsci was deployed emptied out of the subversive quality of his work and the political project that animated his work, which had influenced a previous generation of Latin American intellectuals, was left

out. Martín-Barbero was not interested in recovering Marxism as an intellectual or political project. Rather, he relied on Gramscian insights to examine the region's path into cultural modernity. For García Canclini (1982), Gramsci's writings, particularly as interpreted by Italian anthropologist Alberto Cirese, offered a nuanced approach to the study of folklore and traditions of subaltern classes.

The second shift was the turn from the analysis of mass communication/media to the study of culture in Latin American scholarship. Whereas approaches were largely media-centric in the past, questions about culture are central to contemporary studies. Although this shift mirrored the 'the cultural turn' in the social sciences and humanities in the West, it also expressed a dissatisfaction with predominant views in the region that focused on the media to draw conclusions about the state of contemporary cultures. Martín-Barbero's work was influential in inspiring scholarship that focused on cultural practices and their relationships to various phenomena, such as globalization, youth, migration, popular arts, music, sports, urbanism, religion, violence, political participation and identity movements. Here 'the media' appear as a subject of interest in relation to cultural practices. The main consequence of this shift was the transformation of 'communication/media studies' into a cross-disciplinary field of inquiry primarily concerned with culture.

The third shift is the passing of dualistic conceptualizations of culture, and the mainstreaming of conclusions that emphasize the hybrid, dynamic and porous character of culture. Lately, one hardly finds arguments that question the mixing and fragmentation of cultural practices or the blurring of borders in the region. If colonialism was the catalyst for a range of mestizajes in early modernity, late globalization has deepened hybridization in recent decades. Echoing arguments by European scholars (Nederveen Pietersen, 1995), several studies have argued that globalization, the inescapable backdrop that permeates contemporary life, has intensified cultural blending and decentring. Globalization puts in evidence the limitations of modernist narratives about nations, classes and other categories, as

well as the presumed existence of cultural territories bounded by geography and politics. Modernist dreams of nationalism clash against the constant grip of hybridity. Because hybridity throws the existence of boundaries into question, national and regional identities and discourses need to be examined as political constructions that attribute commonalities to chaotic and diverse cultures.

### **Latin American Cultural Studies and Media Studies in Dialogue?**

During the periods of military rule in the 1970s and 1980s, Latin American cultural critics in exile in the United States, Europe and Mexico started to create a body of work that came to be grouped under the rubric of cultural studies in the mid 1990s. The genealogy of Latin American cultural studies intersects that of media studies but it also has certain peculiarities. In general terms, cultural studies scholars in Latin America were trained in the humanities and moved away from the study of high culture in order to venture into popular and mass culture. Also, many scholars who had thought of themselves as social scientists in Latin America did not find a place within social science departments in the United States dominated by quantitative research, and recreated themselves as cultural critics working on popular culture from within Spanish or Comparative Literature departments. Area studies conferences such as those of the Latin American Studies Association showcased presidential panels focusing on new understandings of culture, and the emerging forms of media and cultural manifestations – film, cable television, the internet – occupied a privileged space in the elucidation of cultural and social phenomena. Together with the other two focus topics of the period – re-democratization and memory – cultural studies appeared to be an area where Latin Americanists could make theoretical contributions, thus challenging the perception that the Third World ‘is not much of a place for theory’ (Franco, 1988, 503).

Although Latin American cultural studies is informed by the intellectual tradition that emerged in the British academic world in the 1950s and 1960s, it also builds on another autochthonous tradition, that of the Latin American essay of the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries, and on French structuralism, postcolonialism and subaltern studies.<sup>3</sup> Cultural studies asserts itself as a diverse, interdisciplinary and political field of academic inquiry and critique. While in media studies this political mark differentiates Latin American scholars from US scholars, in cultural studies it is a common trait. Whereas its development in the US academy took place predominantly in foreign language and literature departments, in Latin America its places of study and research are in the social sciences: anthropology and media departments in Mexico, communication departments in Argentina, and area studies programmes in Chile, Colombia and Bolivia (Szurmuk and Irwin, 2009b). The large presence of Latin American intellectuals in the US academy, in particular, and the intersections of their interests with debates on multiculturalism, democratization of culture, neoliberalist politics and minority cultures sparked lively debates. The defining tenets of cultural studies have been a focus on culture broadly defined, dialogue and collaboration across disciplinary boundaries, politicized academic inquiry, anti-elitist cultural criticism, theoretically informed analysis, and challenges to cultural and political hierarchies of all kinds. The issue of whether cultural studies is relevant in Latin America is still up for grabs. Yet cultural studies monographs and

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<sup>3</sup> The genealogy of Latin American cultural studies is multiple and it includes a process of constant interaction among different groups from civil society, modes of popular culture, cultural institutions, nation states, and currents of continental and international thought. Some of its key influences include: the rich tradition of the Latin American essay of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that problematized issues of identity, culture, nation, citizenship; the Latin American reception of texts of the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, French post-structuralism and Italian Marxism; the horizontal (south-south) relationship with intellectual developments and projects from other geographic areas, such as subaltern, and postcolonial studies, that entered Latin American mediated by the work of the Latin American subaltern studies group; and the development of a Latin American cultural studies agenda in the United States, where cultural studies took cues from social movements of identity politics: feminism, Chicano and Afro-American civil rights movements, gay and lesbian activism, all of which played important roles in the incorporation of critical theory – and a general questioning of canons and epistemologies – into academic debates, as well as from the participation of Latin American academics who came to work in US universities. For a detailed genealogy see (Szurmuk and Irwin, 2009a ‘Presentación’, 11–19; see also del Sarto et al., 2004).

anthologies that fall clearly within the rubric of Latin American cultural studies continue to be published throughout the hemisphere.<sup>4</sup> These publications, along with countless more specialized anthologies and monographs on postcolonialism, alterity, cultural consumption, memory, violence, cultural diversity, new media, cultural participation, performance, deterritorializations, have served to consolidate the field as a category of knowledge production. The recognition of Latin American cultural studies within the international circulation of cultural studies is still minimal, as is the participation of Latin American cultural studies scholars in the US-based Cultural Studies Association, and in the International Association of Cultural Studies. Some scholars of Latin American cultural studies, especially those in literary studies who publish in English, have international recognition in their field. The situation of media scholars is rather different and their work is seldom recognized and read outside the region.

### **The Intellectual Impasse of the Cultural Studies of Communication and the Media**

Three decades after these shifts radically transformed communication/media studies in Latin America, it is necessary to assess the current state of the field in order to identify possible directions for theoretical and empirical work. We believe

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<sup>4</sup> This is represented by the recent publication of edited anthologies including Ana del Sarto et al.'s *Latin American Cultural Studies Reader* (2004) and Stephan Hart and Richard Young's *Contemporary Latin American Cultural Studies* (2003), Danny Anderson and Jill Kuhnheim's *Cultural Studies in the Curriculum: Teaching Latin America* (2003) and Sara Castro-Klaren's *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture* (2008), along with Mabel Moraña's *Nuevas perspectivas desde/sobre América Latina: el desafío de los estudios culturales* (2002), Catherine Walsh's *Estudios culturales latinoamericanos: retos desde y sobre la región andina* (2003), Daniel Mato's *Cultura, política y sociedad: perspectivas latinoamericanas* (2005), Ignacio Sánchez Prado's *América Latina: giro óptico* (2006), Santiago Castro Gómez and Eduardo Mendieta's *Teorías sin disciplina, latinoamericanismo, poscolonialidad y globalización en debate* (1998), José Manuel Valenzuela Arce's *Los estudios culturales en México* (2003), Monica Szurmuk and Robert Irwin's *Diccionario de estudios culturales latinoamericanos* (2009a), Teixeira Coelho's *Diccionario crítico de política cultural* (2009) and Nelly Richard's *En torno a los estudios culturales* (2010).

that the field has reached an impasse in recent years as a result of two tendencies: the dominant presence of 'culturalism', and scarce interest in critically probing theoretical arguments. These tendencies narrow the analytical scope of communication/media research and keep the field in a theoretical 'comfort zone' that is contrary to the intellectual and political spirit of critical studies.

Here 'culturalism' is understood analytically rather than theoretically: it refers to the pre-eminent position of questions and theories about culture in communication/media studies. Although research on media institutions and processes is not completely absent, the strong influence of 'culturalism' is visible in research agendas, conference themes, and publications. 'Culturalism' is the common analytical thread that brings together literary, anthropological and sociological studies of the media. Questions about 'the media' that are not necessarily linked to cultural processes are often ignored. Just as 'media-centrism' is wrongheaded in the study of culture, it is equally problematic to fold 'communication/media studies' into the study of culture. Questions about communication/media cannot be reduced to the study of cultural economy, resistance, discourse, meaning and collective identity.

The intention is neither to propose hard boundaries between the study of culture and the study of media nor to negate the importance of culture. Like other scholars (Curran and Morley, 2006; Hammer and Kellner, 2009), we believe that media and cultural studies are necessarily entangled in a transdisciplinary field, and share a common intellectual space in terms of research interests and conceptual frameworks. 'The convergence of media and cultural studies' (Martín-Barbero, 2006) should not overshadow the study of a range of other questions, namely, sociological and political issues that are central to contemporary societies in Latin America. For example, questions about the links between the media and political regimes, policy reform and media systems, the structure of media industries, the political uses of new information technologies, and media and civic participation

remain not only theoretically important, they are also central to study the current crossroads of Latin America (Escobar, 2010) characterized by the swing between conservative and populist governments, processes of media reform, innovative experiences of citizens' participation (from health to educational to financial issues), social movements, the transformations of the public sphere, political violence and the vitality of community media. The 'media' are located at the centre of ongoing struggles for power and citizenship in countries with long-standing, notorious deficits of accountability and transparency, and abysmal social inequalities.

By the same token, communication/media studies should bring old and new sociological questions to the forefront. Questions about the media in processes of fragmentation, socialization, socio-economic mobility, exclusion and geographical migration, as well as major social problems in the region (such as unemployment, poverty, public safety, environmental degradation, human rights violations) surely deserve attention. The study of the functioning of media institutions, changes in journalistic practice, and production and performance across media industries is critical to understand the political and social dimensions of the media. These are some issues that may not be fully comprehended if research remains focused on culture. In the spirit of the original impulse of cultural studies, it is important to analyse the media within particular, political-social 'junctures' (Hall, 1990) or 'formations' (Grossberg, 2009) in Latin America. A culturalist perspective on the current junctures, however, as is to be expected, generates questions and answers about culture which, while important, do not capture the complexity of social and political issues.

The other dimension of the intellectual impasse in communication/media studies is the scarcity of efforts to push the boundaries of pre-existing theoretical arguments. Arguments about the hybridity of cultures and the centrality of sense-making practices in the study of media cultures are rarely critically assessed in the literature. They are found in numerous studies on youth cultures and urban life,

sports and music, consumerism and television content (Reguillo Cruz, 2000; Sunkel, 2006). Too often, the arguments that have delineated a new course for communication/media studies decades ago have been taken as conclusions to be demonstrated once more, rather than as starting theoretical points to be probed. The consequence is an impressive amount of research that, despite occasionally offering interesting descriptions of cultural expressions, fails to move the field in new theoretical directions. Larry Grossberg's warning about the peril cultural studies faces of 'repeat[ing] the same findings over and over' seems applicable to contemporary communication/media studies in the region. The production of predictable findings and arguments leads to the loss of innovative and refreshing perspectives that should characterize critical media studies. What was theoretically interesting and novel runs the danger of becoming dogma if it is not seriously examined. Demonstrating what has already been demonstrated is, at best, minimally interesting. Instead, it is necessary to approach communication/media research as opportunities to interrogate theoretical frameworks and push for new directions.

Such rethinking is necessary not only because critical intellectual work is contrary to theoretical complacency. It is also necessary because the theoretical and empirical challenges of contemporary communication/media studies have changed since the 1980s. The theoretical debates and research agenda of communication/media studies are, and should be, inseparable from politics inside and outside academia. Three decades ago, the intellectual *Zeitgeist* and political landscape were different: the influence of structuralism and dependentismo was still perceptible in academic quarters, political authoritarianism and military dictatorships were in power, classic Marxism and modernization offered limited perspectives on cultural analysis, modernist conceptualizations of politics and culture were dominant in the mainstream media and cultural institutions, and postmodernism was barely mentioned outside the circles of art and architecture. Today, the situation is quite different. Arnoldian arguments about culture or essentialist positions about media cultures are hardly celebrated in academia; if



they survive in certain quarters, they hardly have the power and influence they did decades ago. Public discourse is filled with references to the hybrid character of Latin American societies. Politicians and movements rooted in the experience of mestizo and indigenous peoples aren't as marginal to contemporary politics as they were. From Mexico to Paraguay, current proposals for media reform explicitly recognize the hybrid and diverse character of cultures. Hybridity is common in television content, popular music, literary genres, art exhibits, cuisine and educational curricula.

Such expressions, certainly, do not offer unequivocal evidence that 'we are all hybrid now' or that the political implications of multiculturalism have been graciously admitted in societies that have historically excluded non-European cultures and dismissed cultural mestizaje. There remains a notable gap between the visions of multicultural, anti-essentialist politics championed by critical academics and the often much narrower politics of culture outside universities. 'Anti-pluralist' trends illustrated by nationalist and nativist movements, or the persistent imaginary constructions of 'white' and 'urban' societies in the news and television fiction are not uncommon. As long as such tropes circulate in the public sphere, they need to be deconstructed and contested. Yet the fragmentary and mixed character of media cultures, the sensitivity to 'culture in practice', and the need to examine media and culture as sites of struggle over power, are common currency, if not in politics, certainly in academic debates.

A quick glance through conference programmes of major regional academic organizations (such as FELAFACS and ALAIC) and scholarly journals (e.g. *Signo y Pensamiento*, *Revista Mexicana de Comunicación*, *Chasqui*) shows that arguments that were groundbreaking three decades ago still remain at the centre of communication/media research (Lozano and Frankenberg, 2009; Murphy and Rodriguez, 2006). This transition from the margins to mainstream has been made possible, arguably, by the fact that critical perspectives have long occupied a

different position in academic politics in Latin America compared to critical media/cultural studies in the United States and Britain. Neither positivist approaches nor Leavisite perspectives had the same grip on the study of communication and media in Latin American universities. Critical media studies didn't have to push against the tradition of positivist, administrative, 'media effects' research that dominated communication studies in the United States. Nor did they have to sustain difficult confrontations with elitist perspectives that excoriated 'mass culture' and defended 'the canon' of high culture. Since its emergence in the late 1950s, communication/media studies has been unmistakably critical (Beltrán Salmon, 2000; Islas and Arribas, 2010). In the context of social sciences and humanities generally located in the left, critical perspectives have become central to contemporary research on communication and media without fighting the kind of academic battles that their counterparts had to (and continue to) fight elsewhere.

In a context of different academic and national politics, the theoretical challenges are different. It is not sufficient to continue to demonstrate the active and mestizo character of culture, find more examples of cross-border cultures, or hammer more nails on the coffin of essentialism. When hybridity, as well as adjacent concepts like bricolage, *mélange* and *mestizaje* (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009) are widely accepted as the dominant characteristics of globalized culture, the theoretical tasks are different. Other questions need to be further explored to shake up theoretical inertia: What media content and cultures are not examples of overlaid, blended traditions? How do we reconcile difference and subalternity (grounded in class, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality) with the blurring of cultural boundaries? When is hybridity resistance and when it is coopted by political and economic powers? How do the media contribute to sustaining patterns of social and political difference/distinctions? What cultural expressions rarely enter the dominant market logic of media industries? Is the hybrid character of cultures properly recognized in media policies and content? How does multiculturalism inform daily

journalism and media production? What does contemporary media politics in Latin America say about current debates on postcolonialism and identity movements?

These and other questions need to be explored not only to understand issues specific to contemporary Latin America, but also to contribute to broad debates in communication/media/cultural studies. Just as García Canclini, Martín-Barbero and other authors (Hopenhayn, 2001 [1997]; Mignolo, 2000) discussed experiences from the region in order to interrogate theories about modernity and culture, it is indispensable for studies about Latin America to be engaged with broad theoretical debates. This should help avoid the narrow boundaries of 'regional/area studies' and bolster the case for why Latin America offers rich experiences for further scholarly attention.

To break the current impasse, the field of LACMS needs to expand its research agenda and probe the theoretical boundaries to break the current impasse. This requires tackling issues that are central to the contemporary state of media and culture in the region. In a region where media industries and cultural production are undergoing major transformations, questions about the economics of media and culture should be fore-grounded. Issues such as patterns of ownership, cultural labour and funding need attention. Amidst significant technological transformations and ambitious policy initiatives, the shape of the cultural industries is undergoing massive changes. The popularity of wireless telephony, growing access to the internet, the massive reach of cable and satellite television, and falling rates of newspaper consumption are altering not only communication practices but the very definition of 'the media' and 'cultural industries'. Simultaneously, various governments in the region, particularly those commonly identified as 'populist' or 'leftist' (Waisbord, 2011), are currently actively trying to refashion media industries through a range of policies that include the creation of public broadcasting institutions, strengthening community media, curbing the power of large corporations, and supporting the production of local and national content. Whereas

it remains uncertain whether these policies will effectively transform ownership and regulatory structures that have characterized commercialized media systems for decades, or for that matter whether they will contribute to deepening the democratization of media and cultural production, it is necessary to study how such changes are intertwined with cultural practices. How are questions about power, hybridity and participation affected by current economic, technological and political transformations in the region?

The study of these issues should be the springboard for revisiting the theoretical foundations of media and cultural studies. Latin Americanists should fully engage with theoretical debates in the globalized field of media/cultural studies and should not shy away from probing critical arguments that have defined research agendas and conceptual frameworks. Contemporary Latin America should be approached as comprising diverse political, economic, social and cultural settings in which a broad set of theoretical questions can be explored. Studies should not only be oriented by interest in providing sophisticated analysis of specific media and cultural processes in the region. They should primarily be aimed at refining theoretical arguments and concepts by asking how developments in the region shed light on long-standing questions about power, globalization, conflict, participation and collective identities that are at the centre of media and cultural studies.

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