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1

Current Challenges for the Critical Economy of Culture and Communication

Ramón Zallo

Our field, be it called the political economy of communication or the critical economy of culture and communication, is just one part (albeit a substantial one) of the critical viewpoint in that set of disciplines – economics, sociology or politics – that take a social analysis approach to culture and communication.¹ By this I mean that our field is not all-encompassing and that there is also a critical sociology of culture and communication (Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, etc.), or a critical political science (Antonio Gramsci, Ralph Miliband, Claus Offe, Norberto Bobbio, etc.), to which other fields will have to be added as they develop (a critical ecology, etc.).

Let us not forget that these disciplines and their critical versions emerged quite a few decades after work had begun on the construction of critical thinking, which in its early period gave a decisive, if not deterministic, role to the economic instance. The scientific advances in all currents of thought have enabled us to overcome that stage, and focus thematically and complement knowledge based on methodological respect, which in the case of critical thinking enjoys an added advantage: the close ties between the disciplines arising from shared epistemologies centring on the same social subject.

The founders on both sides of the Atlantic (including Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller, Armand Mattelart, Graham Murdock, Bernard Miège and Nicholas Garnham) were convinced of their project and had a dual mission to denounce the communication system and redefine paradigms, whether for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or for application in states' national communication policies. We, on the other hand, since reality has

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changed on the other side of the neoliberal desert, are puzzled in a good many areas, such as the analysis of immaterial and global capitalism, either about the project to be defined (quite apart from the moral philosophy of change, which has never left us) or about what historical subject(s) will shape the future. Perhaps to our credit we have a more complex vision of society and its challenges.

Like the founders, we too have a vision that straddles critical contribution and denunciation. But it is for us already part of that three-sided dialectic of confrontation between the kindly Big Brother that is the communicative system of media groups and cultural merchandise; the massive, unfettered and stimulating social communication on the Web, which has led to a proliferation of communicators; and a few social majorities that haphazardly demand democratic communication. The subjects of reference represent, in the first case, cognitive capital; in the second, new demands and new forms of communication; and, in the third, a more mature society committed to qualitative progress.

This is not the place for a full stocktaking but a quick draft. Of little help to us right now when tackling these changes are two classic versions: that of Althusserian structuralism,² and that of the ideologized and monistic models that reduced the media to a propaganda system of power. For their part, two other more sophisticated models that incorporate key elements of a specific analysis of the media also fail to provide answers to all the questions. In one the central focus is owners and financiers,³ who are certainly crucial but do not take into account certain internal variables. In the other the internal variables that influence information are taken into consideration but ownership and the system are not, meaning that a central aspect is missing: the economy itself.⁴ The current social complexity is absent in the four types of models indicated. There, society is but a mirror, a passive subject and malleable mass at the mercy of the media. We need a fifth model that, in addition to picking up on the successes of previous models, is more refined and allows us to understand the complex relationship of the media with society and power at this time. The critical sociology of early cultural studies (Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, E.P. Thompson, etc.) or of Pierre Bourdieu marked out an interesting path towards undoing that deficit.

There is therefore no single theory or tradition of political economy of communication, but many different traditions of critical economy of communication and culture. Part of the European tradition favoured models that ranged from cultural merchandise itself and the process of commercialization to the creation of structures (British, French (Grenoble), Spanish schools, etc.), and gradually pieced together a

bottom-up interpretation, interspersed with the critical contributions of history, anthropology or political science.

Yet to be defined is a general and open model for interpreting the current media and social discourse management system in present-day capitalism. Today's capitalist system demonstrates a great capacity for self-transformation and continues to be based on goods, the exploitation of labour and the private accumulation of capital. And, at present, it establishes cognitive, technoinformational, intellectual, immaterial and digital capital – or whatever other name we give it – as the driving force of the whole system; with the emphasis on the appropriation and management of knowledge and all its derivatives: innovation, creation, education, learning or talent – forms of 'complex work', as Marx called them, that at present are expressed as intellectual work, which is already a direct production factor within the system.

However, in parallel to this, society has become *logos*, communication. The tension lies in who will be the keeper of the word, which goes beyond and overflows the more obvious confrontation between Internet users and system owners.

Economics in the strictest sense must focus on the economic function. That is its role. This does not detract from the fact that other disciplines can, and must, study culture and communication. On the contrary, the critical versions of anthropology, sociology, political science and so on are indispensable, as together, and along with the critical economy of communication and culture, they would make up a 'critique of culture and communication' of sorts or 'critical analyses of culture and communication' in which those versions of these various disciplines might come together in a complementary search for common know-how and paradigms. This would take us down an open road to knowledge rather than in the direction of the closed systems that believe they can explain everything.

Little progress will be made by practising economics that is not economics. We need explanatory legitimacy in the eyes of other more established and dominant versions. We will not explain complexity if we believe that economics is *science* or we do not cross it with other fields. Or to put it another way, critical economy, from the point of view of its own methodology, needs to be complemented by a social theory and by a theory of power, which invites flexibility and integration, or at least a grasp of various related fields.

Luckily, critical thinking does have a theory of history – albeit not a univocal one – linked to agents, particularly the working classes and their conflicts. Economic criticism cannot be divorced from society, its

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agents and effects; on the contrary, it incorporates them as a framework into its matrix. Economics would only appear to explain ownership, goods, work, relations between capital and labour force, production processes, specific output, sectors, boards of directors, concentration, corporate functioning, market behaviours, economic policy and so on. But not the rest. That requires the intersecting of its knowledge to produce social theory, of which economics is a part. Adding the word 'political' to 'economics', 'political economy', helps if it is understood as the 'critique of political economy', but it 'needs to be grounded in a realist, inclusive, constitutive and critical epistemology' (Mosco, 2006) to be added in to critical studies in general.

Social anchoring in the potential subjects of transformation is essential for progress towards a 'general theoretical model' without this needing to be done on the basis of purely laboratory-type thinking, or through a combination of various epistemologies, or from the viewpoint merely of ethics. Our 'economy of culture' must subordinate economic imperatives to strategies of cultural democratization and likewise subordinate the economic vision of culture – financing, sectors, regional policies and so on – to the cultural aspect of development.

Critical economy – unlike functionalism, behaviourism, positivism or postmodernism – will always place culture in the context of societies in conflict and, based on its own methodology, sets itself the function of revealing the structure and functioning of the system, and cannot, to analyse it, be detached from its relationship with collective welfare, domestic and international equality, or the rationality and fair distribution of resources and their uses, or with their opposites. This is to say, the defence of equality or respect for diversity are inherent in the very discourse of a critical economy that, due to its own definition and methodology, does not shrink from its role or its effects as a science for society.

With regard to culture, there is a difference between this and other perspectives, in which it is not economics that is instrumental but culture, which is regarded as a means for diversifying, reconstructing, maintaining, consolidating or developing cities and economies, including local cultural industries. Culture has been pervaded by other motivations. Indeed, in terms of cultural and communication policies on cultural products and equipment or networks, the liberal logic of the principle of subsidiarity has been gaining ground over classical logics in policies of intervention, promotion and stimulus. Similarly, in the deployment and management of equipment or programmes, uniqueness and 'spectacularity' have gained ground over social effectiveness.

In the absence of a metanarrative that is finalistic but grounded in the elements that define political economy, such as history, ethics, the concept of totality and *praxis*⁵ – and one should, I think, add the continuous adaptation of methodologies – it is a matter of rebuilding a critical thinking of culture and communication⁶ that will not be independent from a comprehensive system of thinking anchored in the potential subjects of change, such as workers' movements, alterglobalist and citizen-based social movements, be they alternative or reformist (see Waterman, 2006).

The advantage of the critical approach is that it offers a global vision and a number of tools. We will not easily fall into a formal conceptualist logic, or be swayed by fashions – for example, the 'creative industries' – nor will we disregard the social implications. But we also face certain risks, such as ideologism, a lack of rigour justified by a good cause, the hermeticism of models or subordination to political gains. In other words, we have no guarantee of getting it right, which is why we must be modest enough to study every version, because sometimes it is others that are entirely in the right, or partly so.

Having said that, we must confess that, in this age of social multiplication of the fragmented and socialized intellect, we are witnessing a monumental lapse of focus with regard to a possible project for change and an achievable utopia. In the case of culture and communication there is a proliferation of studies that – with the precision of an entomologist and like an intangible mosaic – detect the changes under way and the new subject matters. From that point on there are differences in the diagnoses, subjects, methodologies or centrality of knowledge. The result is considerable confusion within the main fields and topics of debate of our time and, consequently, in the alliances or the demands made on the administration in office with regard to public service or cultural and communication policies.

Recent research in the economy of culture and communication

The increasing importance of culture within the economy has, of course, led to a reappraisal not only of the economy of culture and communication, but also of critical perspectives on the economy.⁷ Along with critical analyses by the now classic authors – Mattelart (2002, 2005), Miège (2004), Schlesinger (2007), Garnham (2005), Mosco and Schiller (2001) or Tremblay (1996) – there are also reflections associated with social movements⁸ and a continuous output of academic papers.⁹ But

we are also seeing the emergence of new debates and original contributions by young or autonomous collectives.¹⁰ In addition, now that the technological paradigm has completely changed, the debate about the type of regulation necessary for intellectual property offers interesting critical analyses that question the foundations of the creative market.¹¹

But let us not be misled: what in general there are aplenty, on the one hand, are expert reports promoted by state administrations or suprastate regional organizations like the European Union (EU) or the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) – dealing with policies, agreements, harmonizations, observatories, the audiovisual sector and so on – or by cultural networks, be they of cities, regions, researchers or cultural managers, which in turn create the need for research of common interest on a variety of topics.¹² That is useful material for analysis.

On the other hand, there are significant theoretical works based on the conceptual apparatuses of neoclassical economics (Frey, 2000; Vogel, 2004; Towse, 2005; Lasuén Sancho et al., 2006), although the peculiarities of culture may not be of help in the useful or explanatory application of some of their vulnerable models.¹³

There are also macroeconomic and sectoral research efforts – with better results – provided by public or private institutional reports, and numerous statistics¹⁴ accompanied by studies on the cultural gross domestic product (GDP), employment for the sector and the various cultural industries or by monitoring of public and private spending on culture (e.g. Jaén García, 2006). An increase has taken place in the ‘observatory’ function of governments, rights-management companies or foundations, for collecting and processing useful information. There are no longer any countries, either in Europe or in Latin America, that do not estimate the economic contribution of culture, albeit at the behest of suprastate institutions, with advances even being made in the detection of cultural indicators suitable for monitoring and assessing the state of culture and communication or of specific cultural policies.¹⁵ On the microeconomic side a sizeable output of books describes communication enterprises (Población and García Alonso, 1997; Sánchez Tabernero, 2000; or Caro, 2007).

Given this thematic variety, there is often a certain syncretism at congresses, symposia and the like.¹⁶

In university research there is an explosion of studies on the important phenomenon of globalization (e.g. Tomlison, 1991; Beck, 1998; Quirós, 1998; Martín Barbero, 2000; García Canclini, 2001; Quirós and Sierra, 2001; Wolton, 2003; Mattelart, 2005; González Arencibia, 2006), as well as a proliferation of sectoral studies on culture and

communication, or on communication alone,¹⁷ the richness of which brings us back to reflecting on the world communication system, a subject that appeared to have been banished.

Abandoning the path of circumventing problems as if they did not exist, encouragement is being given at present – in a context in which democracies are being strengthened and a number of left-wing governments in Latin America are being consolidated – for the completion of studies on business concentration processes or on transnational power, and this at the same time that anti-concentration logics are being gradually dismantled in the world.¹⁸

In Europe, for example, the topic usually only bursts into the public arena when there is flagrant *ex post* abuse, with the resulting denouncement of the dominant market position and legal action from the competition's courts. But the liberal dismantling has not prevented a certain amount of university research along those lines. Indeed, the umbrella of globalization and that of diversity are encouraging a new renaissance in research and communication policy with regard to two problems that had been forgotten – the unbalanced flows between countries and processes of concentration – topics that until recently had only been addressed by scholars in Spain (e.g. Miguel de Bustos, 1993; Llorens, 2001; Bustamante, 2007a; García Santamaría, 2012).

Perhaps the novelty lies in the fact that there is no expectation of any geocultural solutions being provided externally or by international agencies, but rather through the efforts and understanding of the agents in each country. Regional agreements between countries can serve as coverage, as is the case of Mercosur. Concerns about the creation of the cultural sector are the order of the day, particularly in the publishing field and audiovisual sector, following the successes of several countries in the internationalized production of TV series.¹⁹ Likewise, another traditional concern in Latin America – and in Spain too – is the relationships between information and power (see Jorge Alonso and García López, 2009; or the themes regularly addressed by Reig, 1998).

What is clear is that it is not enough to analyse the flows in themselves, be they transnational or international, and that what is needed instead is to provide the reference to origin (this shows us dominances) and to the territorial and cultural effects (this tells us about dependencies). Not to do so would be tantamount to not considering the problem of power in relation to culture and communication in the world and to the geoculture that it traces. This is not a problem of nationalisms but rather of mistreated social and cultural roots, and of uneven structural flows.

The preferred research approach to the communication system has in recent years made reference to information and communication technologies (ICTs), with applied studies such as those by Garitaonandia et al. (2003), Prado et al. (2006), Saperas (2007), Marzal Felici and Casero Ripollés (2007), Badillo and Ortega (2008) and Beceiro (2009). Indeed, there is a clear preference for research on the forms and effects of ICTs and the expectations this generates about the resulting communication system.

There is a variety of topics in the world of cyberculture, in which the right to knowledge and communication is being reformulated, the functionality of the system is even being questioned, and where reflection is taking place on democracy or education. It is a new social and cultural space, which must be subject to systematic monitoring from now on, and in which the dialogue between all cultures generates unimaginable flows. There are general prospective studies on the passage from analogue society to knowledge society;²⁰ or research studies on communication policies in the framework of technological and spatial convergence – the establishment of the information society in Spain, in the Spanish Autonomous Communities or in Argentina (Mastrini and Califano, 2006), reflections on the digital variants of traditional cultural industries (see Álvarez Monzoncillo et al., 2007) and the occasional withering critique of the next communicative model (Reig, 2001).

There have also been numerous studies on regulation relating to the Television Without Frontiers Directive, or the introduction of digital terrestrial TV in Spain or in the Autonomous Communities (García Leiva, 2006). Access is also available for the regular monitoring of the audiovisual sector in Europe (Crusafón, 2006).

It is evident from all these studies that the concerns about the various convergences are less and less focused on technological accumulation and more on their use for responding to specific needs, and that they appear to mark the leap from an information society of abstract items to knowledge societies with contents.

ICTs are proving instrumental not only in the emergence of a global information society – Castiñeira (2001) puts forward an integrative approach – but also in transforming industrial capitalism into digital, cognitive²¹ or postindustrial capitalism. This centres on immaterial values, at the same time as a Web culture and a commercialized culture are spreading, with informational capital being located in the centre of the system and the human mind being a direct production force, as Castells (1999) stated, or a raw material. That capital should be understood not as the type of collective social capital described by Hamelink (1999),

which would be a social quality – the degree of technical and economic capacity to access information, as well as the application of that information for specific ends – but first and foremost as sectoral or functional capital. This capital would have the function of a connector of the development of financial, energy-related, organizational, IT-related, cultural, ICT-related capital, for the appropriation of types of added value that are more substantial and drivers of the market, and that are now the dominant group of capital within the system.

Fortunately, thematic intersections also occur, such as those relating to sustainability (see Rodríguez and Vicario, 2005; Calderero et al., 2006; ASC, 2007; Esteban Galarza et al., 2008) or e-cultural policies (see Martínez Illa and Mendoza, 2004).

As far as strictly cultural management is concerned – micro- rather than macromanagement – there is a wealth of research, which is all very ground-level, functional and uncritical, on art consumers' preferences and their levels of satisfaction; or the determinants of the demand for cultural services (Colbert, 2003); or the functions of production and cost in firms; or the financing and pricing policy models in museums (Gombault and Petr, 2006), equipment, events and cultural centres; or the promotion models and support systems for the creation and management of cultural enterprises (Gómez de la Iglesia, 1999); or on the world of sponsorship and the conversion of sponsors into cultural promoters of their own projects; or on the most suitable relationships between public and private agents. This is a set of issues little known to economy of communication scholars. And it all straddles economics, the psychology of consumption or aesthetics, as topics featured in the historic *Journal of Cultural Economics* and other publications.²²

Other repeated concerns, this time at the end of the value chain, are how to communicate events, brands, schedules or equipment, or how to achieve audiences and, as a related point, the more structural problem of creating new publics and building loyalty among them, or the secondary dilemma of making programmers the captives of loyal publics.

When it comes to the field of cultural management practices, the concerns are directed towards the training of cultural managers in general (Martinell Sempere, 2006a). The standardization of cultural public management sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish between right-wing and left-wing councils, which just goes to show that management is gaining the upper hand over political thinking. In terms of issues, priority is given, for example, to the use of business tools, creating networks and circuits, achieving synergies, economies of scale or network

economies, new relations with private and social initiatives in the area of cooperation, the new generation of equipment designed for compactness, and the use of ICTs or administrative structural changes for improving cultural services.²³

With regard to government intervention there is a significant output on cultural policy and audiovisual policy, and even more on communication policy or the redefinition of public services.²⁴ In Spain they revolve around the Spanish Radio and Television Corporation, the Autonomous Communities, and local radio and TV stations, and in France and the UK around the new missions of public services (CAC, 2001; Bustamante, 2006).

As can be observed, at present the concerns are being refocused and incorporate problems related to the cultural industries' own production – creating integrated complexes – or the media, as well as its social impacts, at the same time that interest has been aroused in taking advantage of ICTs *vis-à-vis* their technical and social organization for development purposes.

This is in part a reaction to the shift in concerns in the early 1990s from public to private spheres, in culture and communication also; as well as from homegrown production towards studies on demand, reception, uses and mediations – a variant of cultural studies (see García Canclini, 1990). The influence of transnational production was played down, perhaps excessively so, and concerns about developing a national culture industry with the support of national policies on culture and communication were put aside in almost every case. Perhaps this was the result of resignation in the face of the omnipresent market.

The current agenda deals with the setting up of observatories in many countries (Argentina, Mexico, Spain, Autonomous Communities, etc.) and the broadening of their content, as well as studies on culture and development (see García Canclini and Piedras, 2006; Miguel de Bustos, 2006). One particular variant – following in the wake of Florida (2002, 2005), Oakley or the consultants KEA European Affairs et al. (2006) – is the version applied to development from a proactive approach on the part of the so-called creative industries (see Piedras, 2004; Fonseca Reis, 2008; Fundación Este País, 2008; Guzmán Cárdenas, 2008).

In European research,²⁵ which seems to shift between institutional and economic discourse, what is missing is an economic discourse of culture anchored more in the UNESCO tradition in terms of the values of diversity, access and equality,²⁶ which now have a certain continuity (UNESCO, 2001, 2005, 2009). There is also an evident contradiction between, on the one hand, the discourse of diversity led by

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