

The media battle: progressive governments and communication policies in Latin America and other essays

Dênis de Moraes

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The German Ideology is a classic book on Marxist thought. In it there is a utopian dimension that is present when Marx affirms the need for a collective appropriation of material and symbolic means of production in order to reach another social model, the communist one. In it, free from survival tasks, each man can use one's time as wished, without the restrictions imposed by the social division of work. Making it possible to "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, raise cattle in the evening, critique after supper... without having to become a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd or a critic."¹

This utopian and combative dimension also permeates *A batalha da mídia*, by Dênis de Moraes. In this book, the author professes the need for social players dissatisfied with the present order of things to collectively take control of the virtual networks created by new communication technologies and articulate with progressive governments so as to build a "culture of social solidarity" based on equalitarian and libertarian utopias.

Thus, the book is divided in four essays. In the first, *Imaginário Social, hegemonia cultural e comunicação* (Social Imaginary, cultural hegemony and communication), the place where the media battle must be set is defined: in social imaginaries. These are shaped by one's relatives, ideologies, symbols, allegories, rituals, myths and others. Together they constitute the large families of symbolic systems (verbal and nonverbal) produced collectively. Through the creation, formation and use of these systems, individuals and social groups frame for themselves and among themselves their collective



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identities, distribute roles, hierarchies and powers related to which the community's borders (national, partisan, religious, corporate, ethnic, etc.) are set. .

Social imaginaries are essential in order to give meaning and functionality to everyday life. Their formation processes develop in a nonlinear manner because they are swept by a series of tensions, forcing them to structure themselves as true battle fields of symbolic battles. These are distinguished by the creative character of collective actions, products of the imagination of the agents committed to them.

According to Moraes, by means of the act of imagining, every man can "clear up tracks, invent paths and accelerate utopias" (p.33). Utopia is, therefore, a social force that can make players dissatisfied with social order and supplied with a critical stance form "convergent convictions" and "dream ahead". In other words, "envision horizons that express, in a certain historical moment, imagined relations and/or made concrete by men in their experiences, conflicts and private or collective yearnings" (p. 33-34).

The role of these intellectuals, in this sense, is furnishing the utopias and dreams of social transformation of the dispossessed, atomized and humiliated by the present level of capitalist exploitation with the framework of a political-cultural project. In this moment of the text, Gramsci's political theory emerges and so does its unbreakable relation with class struggle. The picture of extreme ideological heterogeneity of the capitalist industrialized society stresses the importance of alliances (political blocs among classes or internally) and the relevance of the consensus as an essential strategy for the formation of a stable and lasting collective will, the theme of hegemony.

This work involves, on one hand, the argumentative and persuasive strategies that allow organic intellectuals to cement political blocs so as to dispute power. On the other hand, the cement used by these intellectuals are ideological principals that can convert, in the medium or long run, a subordinate and dominated class into a effective political force, with its own culture and moral.

Social imaginaries are also the stage, in this sense, of class struggles. And based on these disputes, social groups articulate to profess their dominance of private hegemony devices (communication means, political parties, unions, social movements, etc.) in connection with or in opposition to the social relations regulated by the persuasion or force by the political society (State).

As to the communication means, this conception implies two kinds of political strategy. The first is related to the ones worked out with the "inside" struggles of the media organizations. Therefore, the terms "take advantage of all the fissures", "war of positions" and "gather strength" (p. 50-51) and the designation of media such as "tactic spaces" (p.51) to be filled by groups in an articulated manner because of the importance and centrality in the formation, maintenance and/or fracture of present social consensus in the long run.

The second is related to the transformation capacity of alternative medias connected to militant groups to form what Gramsci calls "integral" journalism. This is modulated by the ability of the communication to intervene in the political-cultural level so as to organize and intensify the diffusion and reception of ideas and information and therefore dispute the hegemony of representations that modulate social consensus.

The second essay *Cultura Tecnológica, Inovação e Mercantilização* (Technologic Culture, Innovation and Mercantilization) emphasizes that the present configuration of political forces and of market media allowed the communication networks that came about on the internet to be incorporated by mega corporations. The formation of a "network society" represents, then, a social body dominated by discursive effects that can consecrate and legitimate the market as a supreme instance that commits and regulates social demands.

The maintenance of monopoly concentrations in the symbolic production sphere now coexists with the diversification of products and brands and multiple forms of offering them in the market. Therefore the term "creative destruction", by Joseph Schumpeter (p.76) is associated with the permanent innovation ideal of the post-modern capitalism. The mediatization and configuration of society in a network deepened the class domination in practice, since social forces related to capital were able to subordinate the "speed apotheosis" and the "money tyranny" (p.83).

This is not about an apocalyptic view of new communication technologies. Moraes reinforces the potential they possess as a space of multiple possible alternatives for the actions of men. However, rejecting the "technologic euphoria" and reversing the "unbridled commercialization of information" requires "critical interpellation and strong social mobilization" (p. 89). Therefore the importance of engaged intellectuals that are discontent with the present order of things to "articulate actions and awareness in the political and cultural field, claiming decentralized diffusions, socialization of information and redistribution of knowledge and a fair sharing of the technical and scientific progress" (p. 89-90).

The next two essays, *Governos progressistas e políticas de comunicação da América Latina* and *Ativismo em rede: Comunicação virtual e contra-hegemonia* (Progressive governments and policies for communication in Latin America and Network activism: virtual communication and counter-hegemony) are more empirical in nature. In the first, the objective is to "investigate and explicit changes in course as of the ascension of leaders recently elected defending social justice" (p.20). Namely: Lula (Brazil), Michelle Bachelet (Chile), Hugo Chávez (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Rafael Correa (Ecuador), Nestor Kirchner (Argentina), Tabaré Vázquez (Uruguay) e Fernando Lugo (Paraguay), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua).

They were classified as progressist because they made explicit their commitment to *change, transformation and humanization* of the present reality, in a context of isolation towards the warlike North-American government

(Bush administration), rearticulation of the indigenous movements in the Andine area (Bolivia and Ecuador) and the contestation of two “force-ideas” of neoliberalism, the occupation of the State by dominant classes who are subject to the oppression of capital and of globalization and sacrality of the market as a “maximum instance of social organization” (p.101-102).

Therefore, among several agents, including intellectuals such as Atilio Boron, Emir Sader, Boaventura de Souza Santos, Michael Löwy, Ignácio Ramonet, Tariq Ali and Moraes himself, a strong expectation was formed related to the political ability of these governments to pluralize and diversify the medias and make demands and social movements of the region visible.

This expectation therefore points at the observation of the role of the State in these governments as a regulator of the market, an action that can harmonize yearnings and care for the right to information and cultural diversity. Thus, the investigation of the communication policy of these governments took place over a few matrices among which these stand out: Restructuration of state communication; creation of new national and transnational TV channels, redefining of regulating benchmarks for the functioning of medias; support to community media; incentives to cultural production and reconsideration of audiovisual.

Obviously, this investigation is inserted in the core of a process still in its course, with different tonalities in the continent due to the asymmetries in the correlation of forces and in the level of aggressiveness of the political game in the interior of each country. To verify the level of confrontation with the hegemonic forces, the progressist governments were divided in two axes.

The first, represented by Chávez, Morales and Correa, classified as “leftist” because they are committed to a radical criticism towards capitalism and, in different degrees, with the dismantling of this kind of society. The institutionalization of their renewed communication policies has put these governments under a violent cross fire by mass media and conservative groups inside and outside their countries.

Cases, for example, like Hugo Chávez’s using the State’s legal prerogative of not renewing a license to the RCTV private channel; Rafael Correa, not allowing the operation of twelve radio stations in nine states in Ecuador because of the noncompliance with the Radio and TV laws and Evo Morales, who used resources from the 5 million dollar funding given by Venezuela’s Social and Economic development Bank to create the *Rede de Rádios dos Povos Originários da Bolívia* (Bolivian Original People Radio Network), a chain of 30 stations (20 AM and 10 FM) in rural areas inhabited by peasants who descend from Bolivian indigenous populations.

Around these episodes there was a conflict between the freedom of press, a value defended by opposition to these governments, and responsibility, used by leaders to act inside the media market so as to alter its conformation.

According to Moraes, “the bloc formed by Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia is the most active in the proposition of new radio broadcasting legislations, in the reorientation of state investments and in the incentive to a noncommercial broadcast (p. 196). But this doesn’t mean a critical absence of voices located among the allies of these governments.

The Venezuelan *Telesur*, for instance, a transnational TV network aired since 2005 and headquartered in Caracas, financed by the Venezuelan government (51%), Cuba, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua and with a set of programs guided by a Committee integrated by Eduardo Galeano, Ignácio Ramonet, Atilio Boron, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Ernesto Cardenal and other intellectuals, was strongly criticized by Jesús Martín-Barbero, according to what was portrayed by Moraes:

Where does Telesur’s inspiration come from? Check out most of the agencies it takes from. Totally anachronistic. The most dogmatic leftism in Latin America, the worst leftism in Europe, such as Le Monde Diplomatique, which continues thinking Latin American from a French perspective. Latin America has several left wings; in Brazil, for example, there is TV Brasil, in which the society’s conflicts and debates are reflected. Where are the debates in Telesur? I don’t know, I don’t see them. I strongly disagree with it because it is a deceiving project (p.131).

This kind of controversy hasn’t stopped Moraes from stressing the popular and avant-gardist aspect of the governments in the left of progressive government.

To prosper, transformations in Latin America depend on political will and popular support. The victories of Evo Morales in the August 2008 and January 2009 referenda in Bolivia and of Rafael Caldeira in the constitutional referendum in September 2009 in Ecuador and of Hugo Chávez in the regional elections in November 2008 in Venezuela confirmed social support to the immediate changes. But willpower has been lacking for other leaders elected in the anti-neoliberal wave (p.201).

This leads us to the government of the second axis, represented by Lula, Bachelet and Vasquez, whose policies are understood as “variations of the neoliberal model”, attenuated by social protection programs for the poorest. Moraes asserts that these governments try to compensate their “tepidity” as to the revision of legislations of communication means with affirmative cultural actions.

The Brazilian case is demonstrated as an example. On one hand, the National Culture Plan, whose aim is to “overcome positively cultural industries and their restrictive and homogenizing nature predominant until the 90’s” (p.170) is seen as a positive example of intervention. On the other hand, the lack of initiative of Lula’s administration to change the radio broadcasting legislation, allowing community radio stations to function; his complacency in the concession renovation policies, allowing Rede Globo to be present in 99.84% Brazilian municipalities reveals his ambiguous stance in regard to social agents (p. 147-148).

After a dense empirical research, the essay concludes approaching one of the problematic aspects of the rela-

tion between political society and civil society, the transformation of state interventionism in political-ideological statism. Mentioning the National System of Alternative and Community Media, from Venezuela and the Original People Radio Network, from Bolivia as examples of communication projects that “join State interests and segments of civil society” (p. 203-204) Moraes questions “up to which point can this kind of cultural expression continue being a symbolic construction, a genuine one, which is weaved and expressed in a community scope without submitting to disfiguring interventions. (p. 204). This is the dilemma of the popular struggle in this Latin America “split between the passionate vocation for the world of life and the suffering that comes from these exclusions (p.206).

The essay *Comunicação alternativa e contrainformação* (Alternative communication and contrainformation) proposes to examine communicational practices that have become viable with the arrival of digital technologies and express views against hegemonies. These practices are related to editorial dynamics that can explore the decentralization of the computer global network. Thus, terms as “alternative” and “engagement” shape a “politicizing” view of a certain kind of journalist practice whose examples are the networks Red Acción in Argentina (www.anred.org), the Rebélion portal (www.rebellion.org) and the Carta Maior website (www.cartamaior.com.br) (p. 233-235).

These organisms are not only broadcasting information. They are organized as communities in which journalism is understood as a communication praxis aimed at “a political-ideological work” and organized by collaborative methods of management in the production and sharing of texts and non commercial forms of financing.

Therefore the journalist practice in these organisms is centered in the open *publication principle* adhering to *copyleft*. The former relates to the right readers have to be active agents of the communication process, including comments, publishing texts and/or pictures to the material edited without submitting to a professional journalist’s filter (responsible for saying what should or shouldn’t be edited) just like the methods used to publish news in mass media. The second is the permission to reproduce information without commercial purposes, as long as the source is mentioned. The idea is by-passing intellectual property rights and the payment of copyright, seen as obstructions to the social broadcasting of contents considered of interest to the collectivity.

Social movements such as the MST and Barrios de Pie (social movements that gather underemployed and unemployed workers in Buenos Aires) use this model. They articulate their own productions, responsible for the identity and cohesion of supporters and insertions on the internet to broaden their support system. They wish to benefit from the “contamination effects” and the “connection policy” allowed by the computer network (p. 237-238 and 242).

According to Moraes, these user networks have the chance to act, simultaneously as producers, emitters and receptors of ideas and knowledge, depending on technical abilities and cultural basis. With this, coexistences by “affinity of lasting or circumstantial relations” (p.240). The computer networks are seen, thus, as strategic spaces in which social movements can articulate among themselves and related to other powers such as the State.

Not every webmedia, however, make their guidelines or publication criteria public in a transparent manner. “Most people defend respect towards collective decisions and responsibility in opinions (p.246). This means that the absence of mediation is not absolute and there are moderating instances, responsible for selecting everything that will or will not be published. Therefore, the *participative webjournalism* is a space to integrate and articulate with organizational forms that range from self-government to a minimal hierarchical structure responsible for the selection and infographic organization of the informative and textual material, normally performed by professionals.

There is a divergence in the kind of media used by supporters of social movements. One is enlarging the public or influencing opinion makers posted in mass medias. The other is the format and language used on sites, which have highly ideological rhetoric “timbres” responsible for reinforcing the party, sectarian and pedagogic characters of the media and pushing away anonymous individuals, without a party supporting spirit.

There are problems as to the content production, as well, still relatively based on the capacity to use conventional medias and subordinate to what is produced by journalists whose authority as social interpreters come from the fact that they are renowned professionals in traditional medias. This doesn’t stop the webmedias from being connected with the diversity and plurality of the present identitarian dynamics.

It is necessary, however, to find a nexus that allows the political articulations that exist in it to, according to Moraes, “transcend the heterogeneous wills and reach a universality that incorporates dialectically the particularities of political players, considering them as constitutive moments of social practices and of the specific forms of engagement” (p.259).

This will happen or not as a result of a historic process. Aware of this, Moraes redeems utopia to affirm that the “appropriation of virtual networks tends to be inserted in the list of attempts to build a culture of social solidarity based on a reciprocity ethics among communicating subjects and the true socialization of information and of collective knowledge” (p.260-261). Utopia is, therefore, the nexus that joins texts in *A batalha da mídia*.

Note

1. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *A Ideologia Alemã*. São Paulo, Editora Moraes, 1984, p. 39.

