To think about communication, culture and subjectivity: an analytical perspective[a]

Para pensar comunicação, cultura e subjetividade: uma perspectiva de análise

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ABSTRACT
This article summarizes the perspective we favor for the analysis of the relationships between communication, culture and subjectivity. In all three domains, it is about avoiding what we call the epochalist paradigm, in favor of localized approaches attentive to differences. Our perspective involves, first of all, avoiding a classificatory view of subjectivities. In addition, reduction of cultural history to a linear succession of epochs is avoided. Finally, both technological determinism and the idea of an omnipotent user are avoided as well, which implies considering both technology agencies and user actions, on an individual or collective basis.
Keywords: Communication, culture, subjectivity, epochalism, time

RESUMO
O presente texto procura fazer uma síntese da perspectiva que defendemos para a análise das relações entre comunicação, cultura e subjetividade. Trata-se, nos três âmbitos, de evitar o que nomeamos de paradigma epocalista, em favor de abordagens localizadas e atentas às diferenças. Nossa perspectiva envolve, em primeiro lugar, evitar uma visão classificatória das subjetividades. Além disso, evita-se a redução da história das culturas a uma sucessão linear de épocas. Finalmente, evita-se, do mesmo modo, tanto o determinismo tecnológico quanto a ideia de um usuário onipotente, o que implica considerar tanto as agências das tecnologias quanto as ações dos usuários tomados individual ou coletivamente.
Palavras-chave: Comunicação, cultura, subjetividade, epocalismo, tempo

INTRODUCTION

THE HARD PERIOD the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (Uerj), to which we are linked, has been through in recent years, involving mainly non-payment of salaries and research grants, with accumulated delays of several months, led us to intimately ask ourselves a number of questions about what it is to research and teach in a country like Brazil, and about the meaning of undertaking intellectual activities in a universe with such structural problems. We therefore asked ourselves, ultimately, about the meaning of what we do daily in our university work, both individually and collectively, and whether such an investment is worthwhile. These strictly personal questions led us, more or less involuntarily, to take stock of what we consider really important in our intellectual trajectory. Part of this reflection is materialized in this text, where we try to outline and group some elements that we consider as our contributions that may be of interest to the field of research in communication in Brazil. Although this article, therefore, originates in the personal universe of questions about our existential trajectory, it ends in something that hopefully may be of broader interest.

Our research has always been supported, at least since the doctorate, on a tripod composed of subjectivity, culture and communication technology.

By subjectivity we understand the human, mental, psychological dimension, but which also involves the corporal dimension, if one considers that there is no human without a body, that every mind is an embodied mind. The Freudian concept of drive, an element located on the border between the somatic and the psychic, allows one to think well about this double presence or articulation of human subjectivity. The subjective, moreover, despite having an individual dimension, is, beyond and below the individual, infra and suprapersonal. Let us think, for example, on the one hand, about the desiring machines, molecular elements of constitution of the unconscious, of which Deleuze and Guattari (1976) spoke, and, on the other, of the complex philosophical anthropology of Simondon (2007).

We take culture in a very broad sense, in order to encompass the entire present and past human existential universe, its values, productions, material and immaterial aspects, everything that constitutes the human context of existence. It is, therefore, a very vague and purposefully open and inclusive definition.

We approach communication technologies likewise, with great generosity and openness, not being restricted to the universe of electric media. Obviously, everything that is part of the electronics and digital universe is seen here as communication technology, but there we also include print, manuscript, writing, imagery, even in its prehistoric dimensions, and, in the limit, speech itself. The list of what can be included in this generous definition of communication technology

would be too long to be attempted here, so we refrain from such an initiative, but not without indicating that, depending on the conditions of production and use, practically anything can be viewed and operated, circumstantially, we repeat, as communication technology.

Therefore, in the tripod that has always steered our investigations, the human individual and collective dimension, the context of human beings' existence, and communication technologies, taken in a very broad sense, are articulated.

SUBJECTIVITY

A classificatory theorization of subjectivity seems to have followed the Kantian version of a transcendental subject and the psychoanalytic version of a decentered subject. It is, then, no longer a matter of thinking a subject that is valid for the human, be it the Kantian or the eccentric Freudian, but of outlining different types of subjectivity.

Such a classificatory theory, in its most common version, opposes a so-called modern subject to a post-modern subject. The terminology may vary, but the oppositional scheme is the same: human and cyborg, centered identity and hybrid identity, identity and identification, typographic man and electronic man, human and post-human. These are some of the forms that this classification could take at different times and theoretical constellations.

The scheme operates, in the first place, with two types of subjectivity, identity, subject or mind, no matter for our discussion, we repeat, which of the terms is invoked. Eventually the two types can give way to three, the third being a recovery of the first, therefore in a ternary scheme that somehow solves the binary (a scheme that would not be exaggerated to name as dialectic).

The opposition between the types is clear, one being the negative of the other. Thus, for example, the modern subject is rational, centered, opposed to everything that is not human, conscious, alienated, insofar as emotion loses to reason etc. The postmodern is eccentric, defined by affective rather than rational processes, hybrid, mixed, extrapolates consciousness a lot, recovers a form of unity between reason, affection etc. As stated, the scheme can operate with three terms, which then places a form of pre-modern subject, defined as holistic, collective, emotional, oral, among other epithets, in marked opposition to the modern. Pre-modern, modern and post-modern would thus designate three different subjective formations, with the nuance that the post-modern subject recovers and updates, as we have said, on a large scale, traces of the pre-modern subject.

It should be noted, in passing, that generally the pre-modern subject is valued as a kind of primeval ideal of unity whose integrity is broken by the specialized and alienated modern subject, the post-modern subject then operating a form of redemption from the fragmentation of modernity towards a new integration. We, finally, contemplate ourselves in our organicity:

> At present the mechanical begins to yield to organic unity under conditions of electric speeds. Man now can look back at two or three thousand years of varying degrees of mechanization with full awareness of the mechanical as an interlude between two great organic periods of culture. (McLuhan, 2005, p. 176)

The classification of the types of subject is also the execution of a value judgment on these subjects, who are viewed positively or negatively according to the preferences and theoretical paradigms used as a basis. As we judge one way or another, our time is accordingly seen as a time of subjective but also cultural redemption, in a way that is sometimes messianic, or of great decay. McLuhan (2005) and Innis (2007), authors strangely grouped under the Frankensteinian term of Toronto school, express these two positions respectively.

Classification and judgment, therefore, first. But in addition, these subjective formations are organized in an order that is both logical and chronological.

Logical ordering: the primeval unity is broken to be later recovered, so that there is initially the pre-modern subject, to which the modern and finally the post-modern succeed. Unit-fragmentation-unit closes the circle of subjectivity in a chain that could not be done in another order.

Chronological ordering: humanity would have, temporarily, given rise, in the first place, to pre-modern subjects. Oral, holistic, primitive, mythical-religious cultures and other qualifications of the same kind came at the beginning to produce their human type. At some point in our history, which is situated by some throughout the second millennium of the Christian era, with the invention of the press, the great navigations, the Renaissance, the Reformation etc., but which others place well before in time, when writing and, above all, alphabetical writing were invented, the pre-modern holistic subject gave way to the visual rational fragmentation of the modern subject, thus losing the unity in favor of a hypertrophy, most of the times seen as harmful, of one of the human faculties. This visual subject would have been in effect, if that term makes sense, until recently, when we then entered another subjective phase, with the emergence of a new form of subject, who exorcises, indeed, the characteristic separation of the modern subject. There would therefore be a chronological

succession of subjective forms: we were first pre-modern, then modern, finally post-modern. Logic and chronologic fully agree.

So far we have three important terms in structuring this paradigm for understanding human subjectivity: classification, judgment and ordering. A fourth point should be added: the ticket operator.

For the discussion that interests us here, the operator of the transition from one type of subject to another is, in general, a communication technology, which is to say that each subjective formation is defined by one or a group of communication technologies.

The pre-modern, holistic and savage subject would be defined by oral communication, by speech technology. Oral cultures would thus generate pre-modern subjects. The passage to the modern subject in general is ascribed to two different technologies, taken alone or together: alphabetical writing and/or the printing press. Alphabetic writing would have determined the emergence of a philosophical consciousness, of the separation between subject and object and, therefore, of a way of exercising reason that is commonly linked to both philosophy and science. To the printing press is ascribed the same effect, which is curious, and the emergence of the modern form of science is then invoked as proof of the revolutionary character of the press. The transition to subjective post-modernity refers to both electronic and digital technologies. We would be, in the century that is ours, at the communicative and subjective dawn of a new era.

Communication technologies would then operate, regardless of whether the theoretical paradigm is more optimistic or more pessimistic, a subjective revolution and would lead to the emergence of new subjects.

So, in short, we have a classification of types of subjects, a positive or negative valuation of the different types, a logical and chronological ordering and, finally, a definition of the transition operators from one type of subjective formation to another. It is now a question of critically problematizing this whole set of elements involved in this way of understanding and theorizing the issue of subjectivity and the subject.

Let's start with the classification problem. What exactly is referred to when talking about pre-modern, modern, post-modern subject? A direct answer: such terms refer not to concrete subjects embodied in concrete bodies, real individuals with their historical existence, but to idealizations that are quite distant from reality.

Something like a good savage naturally in harmony with himself and his group is at the base of the idea of pre-modern subjectivity. Now, does or did such a balance, unity or integration actually exist? Let us just remember Descola's (2006) statement about individualism in so-called primitive cultures:

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Political philosophy, in effect, vulgarized, in a rudimentary outline, an opposition between, on the one hand, the societies that emerged in western Europe from the union of capitalism with the ideology of Enlightenment – where the individual, source of rights and owner of his person, is the touchstone on which the collective building is based – and, on the other, pre-modern societies, totalities structured by immutable hierarchies, in which the individual is absent or, at least, only has meaning and existence as an element of a set that defines him entirely. Now, if societies founded on the preeminence of the whole over the parts in fact covered much of the face of the earth before the triumph of parliaments, on the other hand, there are others, no less numerous, but certainly much less known, that placed the highest value of its social philosophy in the realization of an individual destiny freely dominated and open to all. The Achuar are of this type: little concerned with conceiving of themselves as an organic community, forgetting their own past and indifferent to the future, submitting the language of kinship to the demands of their immediate interests, concerned with their personal prestige and ready to desert those who would like to involve others too much in their own glory, they are only restrained in the exaltation of themselves by the lack, in their midst, of an audience to applaud them. (pp. 333-334)

The idea of a holistic subject, if it can be applied in some cases, hardly accounts for the total complexity of subjective organization in oral, primitive, savage societies or any other term you want. See, in another context, the case of Montaillou, treated by Le Roy Ladurie (1997), which can hardly be characterized as a case of modern subjectivity, and must therefore be pre-modern: such subjects, logically and chronologically pre-modern, have to deal with a huge range of issues, contradictions, heterogeneities and each person in that community resolves this plethora of elements in their own way by structuring a unique form of subjective existence. In other words, everything happens, in the real world, in a different way from what the concept of pre-modern subjectivity makes us believe.

The same can be said for the supposed modern subject: an anthropological, historical or historical psychology research will not find, within what is called the Modern period, or in the Contemporary period, or in the Renaissance, if we wish to retreat modernity in time, nothing of this rational, structured, centered being. Of course, there are always more or less rational and balanced individuals, but there are also those who are completely off-axis, and there is nothing to define people's mental mode of existence within these historical moments as guided by reason to a greater or lesser degree than today. Think of the conditions of subjective existence in English factories during the Industrial Revolution, in the more emotional drifts of human groups in the French

Revolution etc. Zola's *Germinal* (1979) is perhaps the great chronicle of this inadequacy of the idea of modern subjectivity, insofar as it reveals, at the same time, the bourgeois epochal ideal and the total mismatch of people and reality to such a project: the different oppositions that structure the book – between bourgeois and miners, between miners themselves, between the solar surface and the black depths of the mines –, the absolute mixture of bodies and minds, especially among workers, irrationality and constant violence, all of this shows how much the reality distances itself from the theoretical ideals of a victorious reason. What germinates there is, above all, a fine irony towards the idyllic epochal vision of triumphant modernity. They are examples of subjectivities engaged in lives that have very little of the clarity and centered and rational stability that the idea of the modern subject suggests.

The key to understanding this idea of a modern subject, a comfortable chimera that allows us to define ourselves as better or worse than our ancestors, lies not in the world of life, but in the thinking of certain philosophers – however, we will leave that subject for later. The same subjective complexity that we have in the moments that precede ours we find in ours: there are the most varied people, more or less rational, more or less centered on the most varied discourses, getting along more or less well with their peers and belonging groups. There is nothing to define an essential difference between humans who lived in earlier times and ourselves. Of course, there are differences, but just as there are profound differences living together at any time in history. Today, as in past centuries, there are various forms of subjective existence, heterogeneities coexisting in greater or lesser conflict.

Thus, instead of locating a fundamental difference between subjects from different epochs, as if all the subjects of an era were the same, we prefer to situate differences within all historical contexts: there is always subjective variety coexisting, of course, in greater or lesser degree, depending on the human group, its size and a varied series of factors, but always subjective variety. Never a homogeneous pasteurization of subjects as the classification we are criticizing makes suppose.

Our position is that subjectivity is always, at any time, the production of a certain coherence, relative and unstable, from an enormous set of elements, which are economic, social, corporal, religious, familial, educational, idiosyncratic etc. Every person (in the absence of better terms, *person* can be a good choice) manages these multiple sets in their existence in order to exist mentally and socially. There is no purpose, therefore, in talking about a classification or typology of subjects: all subjects are equal, in the sense that they are these unique assemblages of heterogeneities. In the universe of subjectivity, the rule

is that there is no rule. Creating types would reduce the infinite variety of life to generic terms as empty as they are inaccurate.

A hypothesis that seems right to us, but that we are not interested in exploring here, is that all this classification of types of subject rests in a confusion involving philosophy. The subject (in this case the modern one) as a philosophical concept, central category of Descartes or Kant's philosophy – in which it plays an important epistemological role, perfectly matching the philosophical belief in an omnipotence of reason – ended up being taken over by the proponents of these classificatory theories as an empirically existing entity, as the description of people in their respective worlds of life. The philosophical concept of subject then became the idealized basis for the affirmation that the primitive, oral humans would not be like that and, in the end, we, ourselves, are not like that. Now, not even the humans of what history calls the Modern Era were like that. The Kantian subject is confused with the subjective existence of Kant's neighbor, as if the second lived like the first; a philosophical concept is taken as a historical description of subjectivities, which ends up producing such simple-minded typologies.

It makes sense to make a history of the *concept* of subject, subjectivity or identity and its emergence and treatment *in philosophy*. But such a history must be restricted to its own field, that is, it must remain a history of the concept in question and not of the concrete people and their ways of existing over time. What is incorrect is to take the history of the concept for the history of the people in their worlds, of effective life, ultimately. Thus, if there is sense in talking about a modern concept of subject, there is no sense in comparing this concept to the subjective practices of young people in game environments to maintain that they are different from that: the current young person in the game environment must be compared with the youth of previous centuries in their game practices, never with the Kantian transcendental subject. Such truism does not turn out to be a truism when the whole discussion about postmodern, post-human subjectivities etc., is covered.

This way of classificatory theorizing, thus, can serve exclusively to think about *conceptions* or *concepts* of subject, something like philosophical anthropologies, throughout the history of Western high culture. It is, therefore, inappropriate for accounting for concrete subjects in their daily existence.

To avoid such confusions, it may be useful to distinguish, from any terminology that is considered appropriate, the concept of subject or subjectivity or identity, as dealt with in theories of high culture, from the *concrete practices* of invention of a self, which we can call subjectivation practices, subjectivation processes or whatever is considered most interesting, and which are, more deeply, those that all humans exercise throughout their lives.

The critique of the subjectivity classificatory system goes, of course, hand in hand with the critique of the valorization of this or that subject as better or worse, more or less true, more or less authentic or human. There is no sense in such value judgments. Each historical moment, each human context, gives rise to its own subjectivation practices, which are the possible ones, given local conditions. Therefore, the rudeness of anachronism cannot be committed, judging other contexts at other times with modern criteria. In short, it cannot be said that those who lived in prehistory, or in the supposed post-history, are more human or closer to true humanity or to a more integral humanity, than men of the Middle Ages, of the Renaissance or of the past decade. There is not, it must be clear, true humanity, there is no Hegel-McLuhanian teleology of a subject who in the end finds himself cosmically with himself.

Likewise, and this has already been touched on in some previous paragraphs, with the criticism of classification, the criticism of ordination is produced as a corollary. If one can make the chronological and logical history of the concepts of subject (and correlates: subjectivity, identity, identification) and think, within the scope of this history of the great systems of thought of high culture – which is not necessarily only philosophical, but can also be artistic, religious etc. – in orderings and dependences of such concepts in relation to such others, when looking at concrete life, the situation is much more resistant to simple schematisms.

As we said, especially when we introduce the criticism of the supposed modern subject (ten paragraphs towards the beginning of this text), throughout the long history of human presence on Earth, we find people different from one another, engaged in heterogeneous practices of subjectivation. Instead of a kind of global similarity for the subjects of an epoch, which would allow a linear chronological order in relation to other times, what we have are always coexistences of different and varied subjectivation practices, which may be contradictory, always singular. To the genetic singularity of each person a subjective singularity can be superimposed, always dependent on idiosyncratic processes of subjectivity. At each moment, in each cultural group, each person manages, in their own way, the different elements that culture, understood in the broad sense, offers, to build, singularly, a form of existence. Badiou (1995) sums up "the evident infinite multiplicity of the human species, which is as blatant between me and my cousin in Lyon as between the Shiite 'community' of Iraq and the fat Texas cowboys" (p. 40).

The criticism of the idea of passing from a subjective form to another by the action of a technological communication operator follows the same line of argument and will be made later, when we deal with the third element of the

tripod, which has always defined our research, precisely the technologies of Communication. Such criticism, just to advance the discussion, goes through the deconstruction of technological determinism as a way of thinking about the relationship between humans and technologies.

CULTURE

Our possible contribution to a reflection on the relationship between culture and the other two elements of the tripod passes, so we believe, through the proposition of a way of thinking about cultural change and the structuring of human contexts that does not fall into the trap of what we called elsewhere epochalism (Gonçalves & Clair, 2014).

Let us begin, then, with a definition of this term, which constitutes a rough and vague way of thinking about cultural spaces and from which we strongly distance ourselves. We recall here what we said earlier: we take culture in a very broad way, encompassing everything – material or immaterial, corporal or incorporeal – that makes up the contexts in which human beings exist.

Epochalism is a way of understanding the history of human cultures that thinks of that history and, therefore, of humanity itself as a linear succession of epochs. Each epoch has a double character, internal and external. On the one hand, each epoch is internally homogeneous: this means that it is identical, internally, to itself, that its components have a degree of similarity that justifies its reduction to a common defining element. An epoch is defined, then, by the similarity of all the elements that compose it, which we call internal similarity or homogeneity. Thus, for example, all the elements that make up the modern age would be similar to each other, which would justify their grouping under the term *modern*. If there were a significant part of these elements that was not similar to the rest, Modernity would be as if split, an epoch that would have in itself an epoch other than itself, a Modernity that would have in itself a non-Modernity, which is a very interesting idea, but which is problematic from the point of view of the use of the term because it undermines its validity and meaning, since in this case the identity of Modernity would be non-modern: something like speaking of red including green as part of red, which in the end shuffles the whole discussion about colors, because when you say red you cannot know if you are talking about green or red or another color. In short, following the example, it does not make sense to speak of Modernity if that term does not cut out a coherent and homogeneous set of elements, if it does not follow the principle of identity, hence the need for internal homogeneity.

On the other hand, externally, epochalism assumes that each epoch is essentially different both from the one preceding it, if any, and from the one that succeeds it, if any again. Following this assumption, there would be an essential difference between, for example, Modernity and Post-Modernity (or Late Modernity, or Liquid Modernity, or Contemporaneity – as we have seen, the terms used are totally indifferent if the epochalist paradigm is maintained; we can even say that they are interchangeable and are nothing more than semantic details). This essential difference would be what would make the opposition or separation between the two possible.

Just as internal similarity is a condition for the name of an epoch to make sense, as we have seen, the difference with neighboring epochs is necessary so that both the classification of the epochs and the evaluation and ordering are feasible. If there is no external difference and if, for example, Modernity is similar to Post-Modernity, there is no point in naming them with two different terms: more deeply, it is Leibniz's old principle of the indiscernibles that legislates: if two elements are indiscernible they are the same, that is, if there is no difference, Modernity and Post-Modernity would be the same thing. Thus, there must necessarily be a difference between two epochs for two epochs to be considered, a difference that we describe here as external.

In short, and following our example, if Modernity is not internally homogeneous and similar to itself, there is no point in using that term as a category of analysis; if Modernity is no different from Post-modernity, there is no point in opposing them. The epochs, therefore, have an internal resemblance and an external difference.

Epochalism, therefore, sees the history of human cultures as a succession of qualitatively distinct epochs, each epoch being internally homogeneous and externally different from other epochs. These epochs would be linked together in a linear history, one epoch being then replaced by the next, which will be replaced by another and so on. A chain of little boxes, each box having a homogeneous content different from the equally homogeneous contents of the others.

The possibly most common scheme of epochalism, and this was mentioned when we spoke of subjectivity, is the ternary scheme that makes a Pre-Modern (or tribal, primitive, oral, wild etc.) epoch be succeeded by a Modern epoch, which is succeeded by a Post-Modern epoch (or Late Modernity, Liquid Modernity, Contemporaneity, etc.). But, just like for the types of subjectivity, one can find a binary scheme that vaguely opposes Modernity and Post-Modernity: in this case the Pre-Modern remains implicit as a negative condition for the emergence of the Modern. The datings are often very vague when it comes to characterizing these terms more precisely and there does not seem to be a general consensus or

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rule on the subject, except that they are poorly aligned with the classic definitions of history of ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary period.

We have already mentioned, but we must highlight emphatically that the terminology used to refer to different epochs in their linear sequence is indifferent if the basic belief that the history of human cultures is done by the succession of homogeneous blocks different from each other is maintained, each one with its own basic features, or if history is thought of as a chain of neat little drawers, to use a domestic metaphor. It does not matter whether the drawer previous to ours is named X or Y when working with the idea that drawers are suitable, as conceptual tools, for thinking about realities as complex as cultural sets.

The general problem of epochalism is to think of similarity and difference in a coarse and generic way. It is clear, first of all, that similarity and difference depend on the scale of analysis used, and are therefore relative. Given any situation, one can think of similarities or differences between elements in relation to any parameter: the color parameter places a black car close to a black cat, while the raw material parameter certainly places them as essentially different. Thus, there is no absolute similarity or difference.

Now, to take all the differential infinity of the elements that make up a historical context of some centuries, differential infinity of both incorporeal and material elements, and label this myriad under a single term, it is necessary to choose to leave aside a very large number of variations and heterogeneities and take as a parameter of analysis some very general trait which, even in its genericity, is always insufficient.

If a very general parameter is considered, such as the presence or absence of writing, for example, it is possible to divide cultures into oral and written, assuming that oral cultures are similar to each other and that written cultures are similar to each other, that there are no traces in oral cultures that refer to what is grouped under writing and vice versa, that there is, moreover, a clear differentiation between the two. Thus, writing is taken as a parameter and the internal homogeneity of all oral cultures on the one hand and written cultures on the other is assumed, and, secondly, the external difference between these two broad sets.

Such assumptions are quite problematic: to take an interesting example, rationality, attributed by the theories of an epochal nature to the emergence of writing, is clearly present in oral cultures: see, for example, savage thought (Lévi-Strauss, 2010) or the bureaucratic structures of the great ancient empires prior to writing (Schmandt-Besserat, 2006). There are, therefore, important traits that should be exclusive to the written cultures within the oral ones; on the other hand, there are also strong oral traits within literate cultures: both

the assumption of internal homogeneity and that of external difference are insufficient... The case of Brazil is especially instructive, as we live in a country that seems to defy any label or simple-minded classification, being oral, written, electronic, digital, modern, post-modern, pre-modern at the same time, which makes the acceptance of epochalist theories by Brazilian researchers even more curious.

The price of adopting general epochalist labels is to produce so broad a theoretical description that it is obliged to disregard a huge series of local elements that do not fit within what the theory describes as reality, thus producing a form of blindness to the concrete details of reality, which is harmful when reflecting on certain issues.

We stand, therefore, quite critically in relation to this type of theorization. The essential problem that epochalism tries to solve, in a clumsy way in our view, is that of change in history and time: now we will try to outline, thus, an alternative way of reflection that thinks the difference in time without resorting to general ideas of internally homogeneous and externally opposed times.

In a straightforward manner, the first thesis of our proposition can be stated as follows: each human context is composed of an always heterogeneous set of elements, sometimes even contradictory, but which nevertheless somehow join together and form a set that remains, always with adjustments, over time, and whose consistency, always relative, is that of the human grouping itself. Thus, if the 12th century European is taken at random, we highlight, in a list that is far from exhaustive, the Christian religion, a pagan popular culture whose medieval persistence in Europe is well established, oral culture, universities after a certain moment, agriculture, nobility, clergy, knights, the tradition of the illuminations, the handwritten culture, religious wars or not, the idiosyncratic characteristics of all who lived at that moment, the diseases, the courteous love, the mystical love and, within each of these items, a greater or lesser variation, since Christianity, for example, can be lived in quite different ways, and so on. There are obviously conflicts between Christianity and paganism, between groups in the case of wars, between nobles and farmers, but also within Christianity, within the same social group etc. But in any case, in the end, all of this comes together to constitute human life in 12th century Europe. First difference as compared to epochalism: far from presenting an internal homogeneity that allows it to be reduced to a single dominant trait, every context is multiple, heterogeneous, contradictory, any domination being, therefore, quite relative and local, never global. Every context is composed of multiple heterogeneous strata that coexist (the example of Montaillou, previously mentioned, is paradigmatic).

Second thesis: the passage of time leads, to a greater or lesser degree, to reorganizations or rearrangements between the heterogeneous elements or strata. Such rearrangements can occur, but not always, from the introduction of new elements or strata. Thus, for example, the Renaissance, as a cultural movement, engenders changes in several related fields: religious, artistic, anthropological etc. It is not a question of the disappearance of religion in favor of humanism, but of a composition between the terms; the disappearance of all pre-Renaissance art, which obviously remains and will return later; or the disappearance of an absolute entity called medieval man in favor of an equally abstract new man, that of the Renaissance. Each human being continues to do what he has always done, producing a resonance between varied cultural elements, present and past, to build for himself an always provisional identity: the difference is that there are new elements or strata in the composition, without this implying the abandonment of old ones.

Third thesis: rearrangements can be more or less strong, more or less traumatic, which is usually thought of under the terms *revolution* and *evolution*. At bottom, it is the same type of process, to a greater or lesser degree, with greater or lesser speed.

Historical change, therefore, always involves, fundamentally, continuity, but coexisting with local rupture processes that eventually lead to major restructuring in the relationships between the existing different strata. Discontinuity, when present, occurs on deeper continuities and obviously affects them and their development. More than opposites, continuity and discontinuity are complementary processes that condition each other. The idea of an absolute discontinuity between epochs, insofar as it disregards permanencies, seems to be imprecise.

Therefore, it is a matter of thinking about historical change, articulating permanencies and ruptures, revolutions and evolutions, and operating with the idea that, at different speeds, there is always a rearrangement of the different elements or strata that make up any human context, whether with the presence of elements or new strata, or simply as a reorganization of the old ones.

This shift has an epistemological correlate: the reduction of the scope of analysis. There is no sense or even the possibility of mapping this existence of the different strata and their agencies operating with cultural contexts that are too broad; it is necessary, for theorization to be possible, to cut out more localized contexts, which allows a careful analysis of their ordering and strata. Modernity and Post-Modernity, for example, make sense within an epochalist approach. Within the paradigm that we are suggesting, it is rather about addressing smaller communities with smaller time frames (we can refer the reader again to the example of Montaillou).

To generic, general and global analyses, which operate with broad tools whose empirical profile is very limited, we prefer more localized, smaller approaches, which implies working with finer and more delicate concepts, whose empirical profile is more productive.

In short, it is not about the succession of internally homogeneous and externally differentiated periods, but about the coexistence of strata or elements in precarious agencies in constant reorganization, whether linked to the presence of new elements, or without any new strata having been added, there being thus a simple reorganization of what exists, which can be more or less quick.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

As we have seen, we understand technology in a broad sense, so that things that are not usually seen as technology fall under the umbrella of the term. Thus, and we are repeating ourselves, without even attempting an exhaustive approach, speech itself can be seen as a communication technology, involving a speech device (which monkeys, for example, lack) and a long learning process. People without the speech device, who in fact need to learn to produce the sounds necessary for speaking a certain language, replace it with other devices, the hands, for example, and must then learn specific forms of use. A hypothetical human being abandoned in nature, and there are several real cases of such abandonment, does not develop the necessary apparatus or learn the skills necessary for the use of speech technology and, therefore, does not use it. The same argument applies to hearing human speech.

Writing, of course, is a technology: it involves the use of apparatus (support, an inscription instrument), it involves muscular and cognitive learning, like speech, it is by no means a natural physiological act. The same goes for reading.

Music and musical instruments communicate; architecture communicates; rituals communicate; as well as clothes, poetry, body gestures, the Internet, TV, cinema, radio, theater etc.

Taking technology in the broad sense, it is then a matter of thinking about its relationship with the other two elements of the fundamental tripod of our research, humans and cultures.

The thesis is simple: one must avoid pure and crude technological determinism, both individual and collective, or both. Therefore, it is necessary to think about media agencies in conjunction with users and groups of users, the cultural context in which they operate, the traditions of use and so on. That is, to think about the effects of the means not purely from themselves, but in relation to the uses to which they are subjected.

Technological determinism is understood here as the idea that the means themselves generate necessary effects simply because of their presence in a given cultural environment inhabited by human beings. Such effects, in general, are linked more to the form of the communication technologies than to the type of message they convey, which is well summarized in the thesis that the mediums are the messages. McLuhan is paradigmatic about this way of thinking: oral technology causes, in individual terms, a balance of the senses, creating an acoustic space; the technologies of alphabetic writing and printing press produce a hypertrophy of vision and the replacement of acoustic space by visual space, with all the social and individual consequences that this entails; electronic media, finally, liberate us from the tyranny of the eye and produce a return both to a balance of the senses and to the lost acoustic space (it is, considering what we have indicated, a ternary epochalism) (McLuhan & McLuhan, 2007).

One must, we maintain, avoid such perspectives that disregard contexts and uses and attribute divine power to the media, forgetting that they are human products originating in specific cultural environments. In this regard, one cannot, for example, understand the presence and action of printing presses in European culture in the 15th and later centuries without considering that the invention attributed to Gutemberg is the result of and responds to a series of previous transformations that changed our relationship with handwritten texts and produced a great increase in demand for textual material (cf. Barbier, 2006). The means originate in contexts that condition them and their agency necessarily combines with human agency.

The reflection around human uses and appropriations must, however, overcome something that we will call the *paradigm of the solitary user*, which consists in considering that the individual user would be endowed with a kind of total and unrestricted free will in the use of means, that the human would individually enjoy absolute freedom and could consciously define to which use and appropriation he would submit any technology, whether it be communication or not. This paradigm is a kind of Enlightenment heritage in the reflection on the relationship between humans and technology, with the characteristic of overvaluing individuality and rationality. If this path is followed, the media agency is reduced to nothing in the face of the omnipotence of the human user, so that we fall into the symmetrical exact of technological determinism. Between technological determinism and the lone user paradigm we are thus in an undecidable situation of the *either-or* type, or technological determinism or omnipotence of the lone user, in an exclusive disjunction. Either the means are omnipotent, or the users are omnipotent. It is rather, here we advocate, about denying these omnipotences, about considering that both are

agents in the processes of use and exert effects, and it is necessary, therefore, to consider locally, in the given cases, and never abstractly, in general, what kind of composition between humans and technologies takes place. In other words: one must leave the exclusive disjunction.

To overcome the paradigm of the lonely user, it is important to consider a third element in the relationship between individual and machine. This element is the human group in which the use occurs. The concrete situations of use never involve an individual isolated from the world, closed in a room with a technology, of communication or not; what always happens is the use by someone actually existing that belongs to social groups that configure a certain form of relationship with the technology in question. So, an individual's use of the press is traversed by the group or groups to which that individual belongs: Stationers' Company, for example, plays a key role in determining the effects and uses of presses in modern England (Johns, 1998). Instead of the individual user/technology paradigm, a triad should be kept in mind: individual user/groups of belonging/technology. This makes the question of uses more complex and makes the socio-cultural context present, insofar as the groups of belonging themselves are the immediate context for the appropriation of technological objects.

In short, instead of technological determinism and human determinism, symmetrical forms that reduce the complexity of the relationship to a simplistic schematism, we must think of the user/user groups/technology triad, accepting the singular complexity of the forms of agency of these three terms.

COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND SUBJECTIVITY

We are opposed, first of all, to a classificatory view of subjectivity, our idea of subjectivation practices. Instead of types of subjects, ubiquitous processes of construction of a certain coherence from heterogeneous elements, constitutive practices of the human. We produce ourselves as subjects managing different social, cultural, bodily and idiosyncratic elements, as has always been and in any culture. The elements change, of course, but the process of constituting identities that are always precarious is constant.

We are opposed, secondly, to an epochalist view of culture, the conception that any cultural context is an aggregate of heterogeneous, and even conflicting or contradictory elements or strata. The history of human cultures is therefore not seen as the replacement of a type of culture identical to itself and distinct from other types by a new one, and so on; cultural contexts mix, strata are added, but others remain, so that it is never about replacing one ideal type with another, but always the constant rearrangement of strata. Revolution and evolution are

not seen, then, as contradictory, but as faces of the same process, insofar as the revolution in one stratum is grafted onto evolution in others and so on.

Finally, we are opposed to technological determinism and human determinism, a way of thinking about the relationship between users and technologies as a composition between, on the one hand, what the means allow to do and, on the other, the uses that are made, by individuals, but above all by human groups, which give meaning to individual action. We replace the binary logic of user or machine as a determinant, therefore, with a ternary logic, in which we have the individual user, the groups of belonging and the technologies, operating in ever singular and contextual agencies.

Two observations are necessary. First, the three displacements that we operate imply that macroanalysis should be abandoned, both as regards the problem of subjectivity and as regards culture, communication technologies and the relationship of the three fields. Instead of speaking generically and globally about the subjects of an epoch defined (or untouched) by the technologies with which they communicate, it is necessary to carry out local analyses on how certain individuals or groups are subjectively constituted in specific historical contexts, acting more or less in an idiosyncratic way with communication technologies etc. Methodologically, in this sense, the field of communication has a lot to gain from approaching some related fields that are related to a localized and specific treatment of well-defined cultural contexts. So, for example, we can think about the field of anthropology and ethnography, the field of history and the various techniques of micro-history etc. (Burke, 1992; Campanella & Barros, 2016; Chartier, 2002; Geertz, 1983; Peirano, 1995; Revel, 1998).

Second, it must be more or less evident to an attentive reader that the classificatory view of subjectivity and culture as well as technological determinism are closely related, in such a way that a correlation seems to be established: one of the terms ends up leading to the other two. Ultimately, these are three forms of epochalism, with internal homogeneity and the external difference that we indicate: subjective, where one type of subject is replaced in history by another; cultural, one time by another; and technological, one hegemonic medium by another, with the power to define the *socius* as a whole.

Abandoning the classificatory view of subjects, cultures and media implies, more deeply, abandoning this paradigm of a generalized epochalism in favor of a more delicate, localized thinking that is attentive to differences. The change in the scale of analysis, with the abandonment of great epochalist labels, should bring us closer to a concrete reality, the more fascinating the more irreducible to the linearity of the general categories. If one wants a general rule, but outside the epochalist style of generic global labels, such a rule could be enunciated:

there is always a difference in subjective, cultural, technological agency. It is, therefore, an empty general rule, which indicates the need to relinquish generic and broad discussions in favor of existing cases. The deepening of understanding implies a reduction in the ambition of understanding: instead of treating the whole generically, it is better to treat the pieces gently.

We hope, timidly, that a possible contribution to the thinking of communication issues has been designed here. ◪

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