

Barbarism and Mediatization According to Muniz Sodré: Is Neoliberalism to Blame?

Barbarismo e Mídia Segundo Muniz Sodré: A Culpa é do Neoliberalismo?

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ABSTRACT

A Sociedade Incivil continues the reflection on culture, media, and journalism started by Muniz Sodré in the early 1970s. This article discusses the main theses developed in the book, highlighting the originality of its premises and approaches. The discussion does not, however, free the book from criticism, accusing the lack of dialectics in its hermeneutics of the media and the imprisonment of its analyzes to a vision of neoliberalism that has become stereotypical.

Keywords: Muniz Sodré, communication theory, mediatization, neoliberalism, hate speech

RESUMO

A Sociedade Incivil prossegue o trabalho de reflexão sobre a cultura, a mídia e o jornalismo iniciado por Muniz Sodré ainda no início dos anos 1970. Discute-se no artigo as principais teses desenvolvidas na obra, salientando a originalidade das suas premissas e abordagens. O argumento nem por isso a livra de crítica, acusando a falta de dialética presente na sua hermenêutica da mídia e o aprisionamento de suas análises à visão do neoliberalismo que se converteu em estereótipo.

Palavras-chave: Muniz Sodré, teoria da comunicação, midiatização, neoliberalismo, discurso de ódio

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A LEADING PERSONALITY IN communication studies in Brazil, Muniz Sodré confirms this condition in *A Sociedade Incivil* by projecting a reflection on culture, media, and journalism which began in the 1970s to new thematic levels. However, whoever trusts the title will be misled: the work does not have a monographic nature. The attentive reader will not see, in its pages, the elaboration of the expression stamped on the cover into a concept, though the book deals with the levels of civility mass communication currently hold.

A Sociedade Incivil is a collection of relatively disconnected essays, in which the author, starting from the recapitulation of the guiding propositions of his theory of communication (pp. 9-39; 77-88; 91-138), on the one hand embarks on new territories, such as the philosophy of political economy (pp. 43-77) and the theory of automates (pp. 203-228), and on the other renews or deepens old ones, such as the feeling of hate in the media (pp. 229-265) and the trends in journalism (pp. 139-200).

The starting point for the appreciation of the work is, for us, the book's recapitulation of the foundations of the author's theorization about the common and communication, which had been presented in a systematic way in one of his previous works (Sodré, 2015). Sodré's theory seeks to escape the identification of communication with the media, noting that the practical and reflective spectrum of the first concept is broader than that indicated by the second. Communication derives at all times from what the thinker calls *common*, the symbolic order without which there is no link between human beings. The media, in turn, corresponds to its modern definition, referring to its kidnapping or codification by the capitalist economic system and technological power.

Regarding the emergence of a way of life (*bios*) promoted by capital and technology (p. 45), Sodré hesitates or does not make it completely clear whether the media represents a break with the common or, even if radically new, is just a stage in its development. On the one hand, he emphasizes that the media is characterized by the lack of organic connections with the common, but, on the other hand, he requests that, as such, we understand it as "a general field of processes of organization and reverberation of influences within the scope of social cohesion" (p. 26). In the end, we have the impression that, in the author's view, communication is related to, but not to be confused with, the media, insofar as, although they are distinct, the sharing and vital exchanges characteristic of the former, as well as the viral and simulated exchanges typical of the second, are defined from a historical-ontological a priori, from a symbolic organization inherent to the common (p. 82).

Continuing, the author reiterates his idea that the academic field of communication owes much of its damage to the fact that it emerged from and, in part, continues to be prisoner of North American theoretical schemes and research models. The formidable economic and technological development driven by capitalism in the United States grounded this area of knowledge, for better or for worse. With time, this will give rise to communication's relative autonomy, but, on the other hand, created an epistemological situation that still contributes to suppress or even to repress a thorough reflection on its fundamental assumptions (p. 31; see Queré, 1984).

Reducing communication to the media and understanding it as a variable essentially determined by technology hides the fact that it should not be analytically confused with the media, which needs to be understood as a block with capital. But also that both must be thought of together, under the background or instituting ground represented by the *common*.

According to the author, the *common* would be something *inherent to the human condition*, the *symbolic order* that communicatively institutes language, the subject, politics, the family and all other figures in history, insofar as, as it allows contact and exchange, it concatenates or relates – in increasing degrees of complexity, starting from the individual – forms that, without appealing to such an assumption, would only be thinkable separately. Ultimately, communication is “the same as symbolic sharing, operated by mediations (the “with”), of a being-in-common or of a community conceived [imaginarily?] as original identity” (p. 81).

It means that the common, as such, is no more than an abstraction; that is, it still needs to be understood concretely, as something that if, on the one hand, enables, on the other, is generated in the historical movement of human aggregation, in the midst of which all institutions, including the typical modern ones, which the author generically calls a “organization” (pp. 107-118), arise. As a socio-technical device of economic and technological appropriation of the symbolic order, the media is included in it and, therefore, is not limited to transmitting the experience, becoming, rather, a new way of life. In the modern age, communication triggers “modalities of existence in common, in which [in the media age] this space [the common] is technologically redefined so that signs, images and digits create a world of their own, and so that displacement is completed in a virtual (electronic) sphere” (p. 45).

Using the term “mediatization” to theoretically designate this process, the author makes it clear that he is not dealing with something from experience, but with a conceptual construction (p. 122), which “synthetically describes the articulated functioning of traditional social institutions and of individuals, with

the media organizations responsible for creating an electronic sea in which we are already swimming” (p. 118). That is to say, mediatization consists of a critical-hermeneutic concept since it is not subject to empirical indexation, whose usefulness would reside above all in an intended ability to think about the cultural processes underway today (pp. 118-119).

Luhmann (2017) understood money as a symbolically generalized form of communication, seeing it as an institution capable of allowing contact and exchanges between social agents in contexts of high functional differentiation and systemic complexity. Sodré, in a way, takes up this thesis, proposing a critical theory of its advanced state marked by what he calls financialization, but relying more on Baudrillard (1973) than on Simmel (1900/1990), a pioneer of the social theory of money.

For the Brazilian author, modern communication tends to be reduced to the media, as the common is metamorphosed or gives way to what he calls code, borrowing the expression from the French thinker (p. 47). That is, it gives way to the articulation that forms “a new socio-technical order, driven by information at all levels, which can be defined as a generalization of existence through finance and technology” (p. 47). Originally economic, the law of value, monetarily regulated, is beginning to encompass other sectors of life, through the progressive computerization of the totality of social relations (p. 71).

When capitalism appears, we testify the imposition of political economy, whose exchanges are mercantile and, therefore, the code is inevitably money, there being no other way to keep the calculations. When money becomes the main market, since everything revolves around it, and information technology develops, digital communication defines the code. This stage is that of “neoliberal finance” (p. 63), since the truth of what was called code almost half a century ago, instead of sign, is, as more or less predicted, the algorithm (see Baudrillard, 1973, p. 110, note 3).

Despite noting that the mediatization associated with the totalization of life in the plane of virtuality (p. 62) lacks a single command center (p. 119), Sodré, as a rule, speaks of the media as a subject. Thus, it is not surprising that, in one of the most stimulating sections of the work, he accuses it of being “a great operator of [current] hate speech” (p. 245). Certainly, the problem is not new: arising in structural correspondence with love, hate is a feeling that is both original and ambivalent (p. 258). Hatred has existed since at least Christianity (Nietzsche, 1887/1998).

As Sodré says, more than an individual, isolated feeling, hatred is a “social form” which can be transacted, but would prove to be virtually insurmountable (p. 256). A condition of difference from one individual to another, hatred, like

so many other feelings and emotions, is a possibility inscribed in every social interaction (see Sodr , 2006).

The fact to consider, according to the text, however, would be that, with our surrender to it, mediatization would be exacerbated instead of mitigated (p. 251); pressured by neoliberalism, there would be a perverse affirmation of the aforementioned social form, through which subjects would need others to spew their hatred for, and hatred would become “a unanimous emotion” (p. 254).

For Sodr , the search for someone to blame and hate – or to persecute, in the extreme –, came to have an analytical, intrinsic relationship with mediatization and, therefore, with neoliberalism (p. 247). However, does this hold up? According to the author, corporations exploit the hateful passions that are supposedly born from the insertion of the masses in existing production and exchange relations or their exclusion from them – but it must be remembered that the media does not only play with the fears and desires that increase terror. “Contact without measurements, fast, hallucinatory”, which reduces human relationships “to crude binary options” (p. 259), is a fact in the media – but it should not make us forget about the campaigns and humanitarian actions, which, also through the media, often arouse moral conscience and help the banal subject prevent the worst among his fellow men.

The perspective of understanding the media as mediation seems to us more advantageous than understanding its hermeneutics as a parallel reality, a form of life of its own, relatively autonomous before other processes, instituted and contradictorily transformed through social praxis. The aesthetic and moral abominations that, from an enlightened conscience perspective, swarm the media should not make us forget its role in the formation of a critical attitude and in encouraging philanthropic actions that, despite their lightness and superficiality, foster citizenship and humanitarian sentiments among masses that would otherwise probably be more, not less, barbaric.

The Sodrerian statement that hate reveals itself as a “brute form of hegemony” (p. 252), valid in situations of underdeveloped capitalism and despotic regimes, does not apply to free and open societies, which arise from economic progress and are maintained with enlightened ideas. The association of the white “media class” with the narcissistic aversion to others as people who could disturb or divide the respective place of speech or occupy its space (p. 262) sounds stereotyped by a primary leftism. The proposition may, with nuances, apply to a part of this segment: essentially, it only serves, however, for catharsis; it does not academically and critically account for the conduct and moral conscience in the media age in advanced societies (see Bauman, 1993).

“The failure of the fiduciary bond with society”, which, without a doubt, “can feed hatred as a fundamental passion” (p. 254), is a relative phenomenon and should not be put into the mediatization account unless we understand it in a different, more open and dialectical way as a mediation process that, as far as one can see, does not matter as a whole and necessarily in the cancellation of reciprocal social praxis in changing and contradictory situations.

Apparently convincing, the Sodrerian reflection on hate speech, in essence, is only seductive, because although the thinker teaches that communication is *pharmakon*, that is, poison and cure, this is not what is seen in his analysis of hate speech on the internet. Sodré overlooks the role of capitalism in the civilization of manners and the much more brutal ways in which it expressed itself in the past, accused even by Marx. The caveat that hatred precedes the emergence of the media, which would only radicalize it in speech, seems to ignore that, previously, hatred and hate speech were much more every day and that, since its origins, the media is ambivalent about them. For better or worse, the media has contributed to the civilization of manners and the advancement of humanitarian morality (Lipovestky, 1994, pp. 147-180; 243-320).

Taken by righteous indignation at the persistence of stupidity among us, Sodré seems to see only the barbaric forces in the market, as if those forces, before the expansion of that institution, were always noble or even better. The theme requires historical and dialectical apprehension. It is undoubtedly surprising that, in the midst of an age of jealousy for civilization, humanity surrenders to persecutory passions and destructive fantasies, dreaming of scenarios where everything would be allowed by practicing their communications (p. 247).

However, it is worth remembering that, in situations where the law is in force and people have some social and economic protection because of wealth generation and distribution, this is less and less acted upon. To consider civilization in its ambiguity (Elias, 1993), today, necessarily involves accepting its inevitable intertwining with barbarism, its reciprocal and perhaps endless provocation, which could however be mitigated by politics and thought. There is no more way to admit analyses conducted with the uncritical endorsement of the historicist belief of establishing perpetual peace and universal happiness.

The chapter on journalism contains another sign of the capture of the author’s ideas by a negative dialectic of philosophy of history related to the thesis, which is that instead of a social order, we are seeing the irruption of a new barbarism via the internet. Despite subscribing to the thesis that there can be “an information system capable of rationally expanding the transparency of major social problems, opening the way for a deliberative democracy” (p. 169), Sodré leans toward the apocalyptic judgment, taking up Dewey (1927) and

Habermas (1984) to argue that changes in public information are destroying this possibility (pp. 139-200).

According to him, the idealized vision of the press and the democracy of opinion must be counterbalanced by understanding the former as a collective intellectual of the ruling classes – not necessarily as their instrument, but as an institution inscribed in a form of hegemony, since, despite serving political interests, journalism inevitably reveals its contradictions (p. 169). Whenever the public sphere remains open, with several sources of information, the democratic consensus is exposed to argumentative diversity, without losing its transforming potential, since the journalistic text articulates several possibilities of apprehension of reality without being stripped of the ideological “background [represented by] consensual truth” (p. 168).

The news is always tied to the logic of the fact, being a discursive formation of a potentially argumentative nature open to others (p. 157). It is sensible “to the transformations and passages inherent to the dialogic work of the historical reality” (p. 142). Parliamentary politics and the exercise of citizenship, with their struggles and disputes, consensus and questioning, are unthinkable phenomena without the mediation of the free press (pp. 151-152). Journalism cannot be thought of if we separate it from the duty to tell the truth,, i.e., respecting common sense and not ignoring the facts, as the social-historical order stipulates them (p. 144).

In spite of everything, journalism is fundamental in improving public discussion and argumentative conviction, which arise from the democratization of opinion and the development of citizenship. It was never reduced to an instrument of deception and never had the sole function of informing, carrying at its core the incentive to public conversation (p. 143).

Today, however, we would see what the author calls the organization overlapping the hegemony. Corporations supposedly are imposing their will on the games and struggles for opinion. The public space was colonized by the media device, making the “paraliterary rhetoric of journalism” retreat before the “scenographic exposition of images” (p. 156). The discursive rationality is leaving the scene, leaving only the emotions as a means of learning the facts (p. 176).

The presupposition is represented by an intersubjectively understood civil society, moved by ideological arguments, retreated in the face of a mass atomized in bubbles, thirsty for emotions, ready to make affective discharges in mere images (p. 171). The civil power that represented the press of the past gave way to the logic of algorithms and financial markets underlying the computerized economy. The supply and demand of excitement mentioned by Elias (1986)

prevails over the observance of the distinction between true and false, reducing respect for information verification mechanisms (p. 158).

Events lost the conditions of politically negotiated discursive elaborations to become a function of algorithmic mechanisms in virtual forums. The public's idea of a more or less cohesive and coherent character was replaced by the notion of "individualized followers of a publisher emotionally chosen as a guide in the electronic network" (p. 149). The power to schedule the facts that would belong to the press became much more fragmented and variable in the midst of a scenario dominated "by sensations and emotions emptied of any argumentative ballast" (p. 181).

Social subjects tend to know less and less of what they are talking about as they allow themselves to be taken by the "ecstasy of contact". Facts are being converted into stimuli that epidermically adhere or can be irrationally adapted to the subjects' desires by "a logic segmented by the market and distant from a paradigm politically referred to ideas of popular sovereignty" (p. 156). The old media transformed the truth obtained by consensus of the liberal era into a product reiterated by the mechanics of mass production of images (p. 154-155). The new one relies on this essentially sensitive and affective basis to promote "a scenic game of facts that makes them undecidable" from the angle of truth accessible to common sense by leaving its meaning "to the free choice of the receivers" (p. 156).

From our view, all of this sounds quite plausible as a general diagnosis of the epoch in the history of the public sphere, although one should not believe that information has simply lost its roots in the broader facticity because of its sublimation in the virtual bios engendered by the combined action of technology and finance capital. We would argue that the emergence of a "parallel reality", capable of trapping subjects in the "vicious circle" of a "media bios" (p. 174), is a moment or aspect only, not the essence or substance of social praxis even in the most advanced zones of the planet. It seems undeniable that the processes of citizenship formation and morals and of liberal and democratic political integration in traditional institutions are in crisis or running out; however, if we understand them as the willingness to defend the agonistic game of differences and tensions between their social subjects, the rules are socially instituted to keep all this free and open (p. 185).

Sodré defends the thesis that society is becoming barbarized, insofar as neoliberalism, converted into the origin of all evils, a spectral subject of history, gives rise to a *proto-fascism* by inciting different social groups to propagate fear and express hatred amid the financialization of life and its sublimation into an essentially virtual form of existence, in the "media bios" (p. 167). The author's

stance, however, does not seem convincing to us: the suggestion that, through the *activism of capital*, neoliberalism would have transformed civil society into its opposite, that is, into wild terrain, is essentially impressionistic. Unless provided empirical evidence of the contrary, the financialization of life and the technologization of existence do not seem to have, in theory, a direct and linear connection with the reactions to political corruption, nationalist outbreaks, and the mental confusion caused among many people by “the accelerated transformation of customs and the ephemerality of events” (p. 165).

No one will deny that the destruction of jobs and the consequent lowering of general standards of living caused by the economic and technological development of capitalism, even if unevenly, have a negative impact on the conscience of countless social groups. However, it would be unreasonable to think that the expansion of the system benefits only “the pole of the ruling classes” (p. 77), being enough, to be convinced, to consult the evolution of indicators on poverty, health, education, housing, and democracy in the last 40 years in the graphics and studies on the Our World in Data website (<https://ourworldindata.org/>). Whoever proposes to explore this subject needs to examine without prejudice the role of the State in the accumulation of capital, in the bureaucratic appropriation of wealth, in the political generation of inequalities, and in the provision of public services – which, in the book here addressed, is not considered by Sodré.

Moreover, it should be noted that the proto-fascism underlying contemporary hate speech, that is, the “ambiguous and mutant attitude, refractory to tolerance and to the rationality of opinions”, which, sheltered in networks, feeds on cruelty and serves politically degenerate processes (p. 166), is no longer an exclusively right-wing phenomenon, but also verified among the collective leftist movements that, more recently, have come to use the particularist banners of reaction to articulate power projects that abdicate from democracy and could result in a loss of freedoms.

The idealized and nostalgic rehabilitation of god, homeland, and family is not essentially different from the sectarian and patrolling promotion of race, gender, and cultural exceptionalism: both of them are sinister exasperations of an authoritarian bent, phenomena capable of eliciting destructive dreams against the other, if not delusional fantasies of an “amorphous discursivity, more emotional than argumentative” (p. 167), which, as the author says, give rise to regressive processes, “facilitators of the action of politically perverse leaders” (p. 167).

Muniz Sodré sustains with subtlety and rare elegance the thesis of communication as a form of domination, accusing its promotion of political neutralization of cognition and sensitivity as it becomes a form of artificial life that, in the decades before, he had identified as telereality, simulacra, and mediatization.

The reading report summarized above sought to contribute to the analysis of Sodré's work, suggesting questions to critically revisit it and keep the space of theoretical discussion alive in the academic field of communication. ■

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