Studies of Communication and Consumption:
Interdisciplinary work in neoconservative times

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What happens with radio, television, film? In spite of the economic pressures that strongly influence them in their style and the rules of communication, these mediums possess a certain autonomy from other types of production. A television editor or producer who only takes into account the market values and forgets about the symbolic merits of what she or he produces (although this may occasionally be good for business) loses legitimacy with the public and with specialized critics. There are groups of consumers with expert knowledge of the history of each area of culture—more so in the case of science, literature and art, but also in the case of soap operas and musicals—who select what they consume according to exact rules of taste and specifically cultural criteria.

people consume in different social scenes and in different ways, from the corner store to the neighborhood market and from huge shopping centres to television. Nevertheless since activities on a massive and anonymous scale are intertwined with interactions that are intimate and personal, it becomes necessary to think about them in relationship to one another.

We have learned in recent years that the massive and anonymous organization of culture does not inevitably lead to uniformity. What we observe with mass consumption is not the homogenization of consumers but rather interactions between distant social groups through a very segmented communication link. The major commercial networks provide heterogeneous offerings which relate to disparate habits and tastes. In Mexico City we find very differentiated groups among consumers. To speak of musical preferences alone, it is among older people and those with a low level of education that we find the greatest number of followers of ranchera and tropical music. Classical music and jazz mainly attract middle-aged professionals and upper-level students. Rock listeners tend to be young people and adolescents. People tend to locate themselves in certain musical tastes and different styles in accordance with generation gaps and economic and educational differences.

Does so-called cultural consumption have a specific set of problems? If the appropriation of any good is an act that symbolically differentiates, integrates and communicates, objectifies desires and ritualizes satisfactions and if we say that to consume, in fact, serves as thinking, then all acts of consumption—and not just those related to art or learning—are cultural acts. Why then separate out what happens in connection with certain goods or activities and call them "cultural consumption"?

This distinction is theoretically and methodologically justified because of the partial independence gained in modern times in the areas of art and communications. Art, literature and science have been freed from the religious and political controls which previously imposed a variety of standards on them. Independence was achieved, in part, by a global secularization of society, but also by radical transformations of distribution and consumption. The growth of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, as well as the general increase in education seemed to form specific publics for art and literature in which works are differentiated and selected according to aesthetic criteria. A set of specialized institutions—art galleries and museums, publishing houses and magazines—offer independent circuits for the production and circulation of these goods. Products that are deemed to be cultural have use and exchange values. They contribute to the reproduction of society and at times to the expansion of capital. But in them the symbolic values prevail over utilitarian and mercantile values. A car that is used for transportation includes cultural aspects, but it is inscribed in a different register from the car that the same person—an artist, let's suppose—uses in an exhibit or uses in a performance. In this second case, the cultural, symbolic and aesthetic aspects dominate over the utilitarian and mercantile cases.

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As such it is possible to define the particular character of cultural consumption on the combination of processes of appropriation and uses of products in which the symbolic values prevail over the use and exchange values. This takes the particular character of cultural consumption into account. Not only does it take into account those goods that have greater autonomy, such as the type of art found in museums, concert halls, and theatres. It also includes those products that are conditioned by their commercial aspect (television programs), or by their dependence on a religious system (active crafts and dances), the development and the consumption of which requires a prolonged training in relatively independent symbolic structures.

It is not surprising to find that, within the tastes of consumers of all classes, there exist goods from different times and groups, and within the same categories, and take on the character of cultural consumption. This notion has been defined as the process of explaining the complex processes of interdependence between these two entities. Contrary to the previous one, the notion that the consumption of cultural goods can be explained by the processes of assimilation, rejection, negotiation, and re-working of what the brochures are proposing do take place. Among the television programs, political speeches and the things that consumers read and use these three elements: the family, barrio or group culture, and other microsocial events. Each object destined for consumption is an open text that demands the cooperation of the reader, the spectator, or the user, in order to be completed and have meaning.

The hybridization of consumption is not homogeneous. The hybridization itself is not complete. The national structure, historically consolidated in our societies, and the transnationalization generated by modernizing policies. The hybridization of consumption between classes and ethnic groups, that seems to be resolved by the institutionalization of the notion, are shown to be in crisis due to the force of the multiplicity of internal and international processes that challenge this institutionalization. The notion becomes diluted, first, by being invaded on a daily basis by foreign messages, and second, by the presence of regional movements of differentiation that question thecentrality of cultural goods to which this gives rise.

A new conception of the role of the state can be understood governmental policies where the government, instead of leading over a large part of the cultural integration function to multinational communication enterprises, has pointed to the privatization of those areas that have been considered to be of public interest. The result of what has happened is that the idea of new protocols that are not just economic agreements, but cultural agreements as well. New rules about the reproduction of the TV work-force and the expansion of origin, new models of competition among groups that wish to appropriate the social product, new norms.
of symbolic differentiation; these generate a restructuring of consumption. Will these changes bring new forms of integration and communication, or will they accentuate inequality and differences in the access to goods?

The answer to this question lies in an analysis of how priorities about services are established in the stage which is governed by the supposed self-regulation of the market. Heterogynic neoliberalism, acting within the old concept whereby the "objective" laws of supply and demand are the healthiest mechanism for ordering the economy, is promoting the concentration of production—and consumption—within continually more restricted sectors. The privatizing and selective regionalization that is taking place is, at times, so severe that demand is descending to the level of biological survival. For large sections of the extremecly poor, the needs around which people are organizing are those of food and work.

Some groups are organizing their response to this hegemonic policy by seeking the restoration of the previous social contract and the type of state it represented. Other see possibilities for resistance in the strengthening of traditional, craft-based, small-group forms of life that may still have validity for the reproduction of some sectors of society, but which have been transformed by the effects of globalization. It is possible that these groups still have considerable capacity for organizing and promoting significant modifications, but any such project should consider the state as a key objective. If it is to intervene in the modernizing and reorganizing that is taking place, the state should consider the needs and interests of the people, even if subordinating them to the interests of the market.

In this sense the multi-disciplinary study of communication and consumption could be a resource for understanding the meaning of modernization and for promoting the participation of broad sectors of society. For one thing, the collaboration of communication theorists who have specialized in learning about the structure of industry and cultural markets with sociologists and anthropologists who have specialized in understanding their own communities can help the analysis of consumption to transcend the simple consideration of the commercial aspects of products. But it would also be useful if we could manage to come together to discuss the new mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion with regard to goods and strategic messages in the current modernizing stage.

As far as cultural consumption is concerned, since it continues to be necessary to seek the democratization of art and cultural knowledge, modernization is confronting us with new demands. The global vision that we had proposed for the role of the consumer as the agent of social reproduction, the growth of the national product and of competition and differentiation between groups leads us to ask what restrictive policies around the consumption of new technologies mean for the future. How does one effect a process of modernization that requires a more highly trained labor force while the drop-out rate from school is growing and access to specialized information is limited? We must assess what the growing unequal segmentation of consumption means for political democratization and the participation of the majority. On the one hand, there is information that makes it possible to act, if one has a personal subscription to exclusive television networks and data banks. On the other hand, there is a communication model for the masses, organized according to the commercial laws of entertainment, which manages to reduce even political decisions to the level of the spectacle.

Confronting this dualistic organization of Latin American society is a major challenge which requires the collaboration of social scientists. By situating the growth of communication studies in the context of globalized consumption and information for the majority, we will be making visible the contradictions of this regime of the extreme.

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