Post-Marxist Post-Modern Cultural Populism From Birmingham to Bogota?

By Nick Witherford


The translation of this work by one of Latin America's leading communication theorists has a twofold importance, for it not only opens a richly informed perspective on the relation of media and social movements in the South, but it also makes a provocative contribution to our comprehension of the transformations current within cultural studies in the North.

According to Martín-Barbero, Latin America's crises of the 70s and 80s— including the rise and fall of military dictatorships, triumphs and defeats for revolutionary socialism, and the appearance of new forms of popular movements—have compelled its intellectuals to rethink the role of mass communications in social change. Focus has shifted "from media to communications." Theories of "media manipulation" which saw the controllers of the mass media unremittingly imposing ideological domination on passive audiences "without the slightest indication of seduction or resistance" now seem insidious. In their place is emerging a more complex sense of "mediations," stressing the "articulation between practices of communication and social movements," and the possibilities for resistance and reappropriation in the reception of media messages. To grasp these processes Martin-Barbero develops a theory of the interaction between "popular" and "mass" media. The concept of "the popular," he argues, one misunderstood by both left and right—too widely identified with Marxists into reductionistic schemas of class, and by conservatives into the image of the vulgar masses. What is needed now is a rediscovery of "the people" in the sense better understood by 19th century Romanticism and anarchism. By rejecting the sub-codinate, positively insurgent sector of society whose boundaries exceed those of the proletariat and embrace a multiplicity of cultural experiences. In the case of Latin America, with its tormented colonial and post-colonial history, this means recognizing "the popular" as constituted by mestizaje—mixtures, complementing native, peasant and urban identities in a series of densely layered, historically dynamic hybridizations. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, capitalist modernization has attempted the "mestizaje" of these mestizaje, violently and often with success, but has also made a provocative contribution to our comprehension of the transformations current within cultural studies in the North. In this project the mass media has been allocated a major role as an instrument of enculturation.

However—and this is Martin-Barbero's crucial point—mestizaje cannot wholly succeed in the destruction of popular cultures, for "there is no imposition from above which does not imply, in some form, an incorporation of what comes from below." Mass culture aims to win consent for development by "covering over differences and reconciling tastes." But this is possible historically only to the extent that it simultaneously "transforms and activates" the content of pre-existing knowledges and traditions. The mass media is caught up in an intricate interplay of submission and resistance, opposition and complicity, because "contrary to the predictions of social implosion and depoliticization, the masses still contain—" in the double sense of control and conservative within—the people." There is thus a sense in which "subversion is embodied in integration."

Martin-Barbero stresses that in affirming the resilience of the popular he is not seeking a nostalgic rescue of "authentic" archaism, but rather tracing a living process in which popular memory interacts with communicative innovation to generate "new combinations and syntheses..." that reveal not only the racial mixture but come to mould the "inter- mingling and reworking of modernity and the residues of various cultural periods, the mixtures of social structures and sentiments." With examples ranging through Mexican cinema, Argentinean radio, black music in Brazil and Chilean journalism he shows how the subordinate classes 'take the products of the culture industry and 're-constitute them out of their experience of their own neighborhoods and struggles. The media is in turn obliged to acknowledge the demands issuing from below, creating "a popular that appeals to us from the mass."

"Thus, for example, Martin-Barbero insists that Latin America's famous form of soap opera, the telenovela, is no mere instrument of capitalist indoctrination, but rather articulates an idiom of passion and moralism which lies outside the bounds of modernizing rationality, thereby "allowing the people a space to recognize themselves as the authors of their own history" and providing a language for the "popular forms of logics."

By this point, readers familiar with British and North American cultural studies may themselves experience a certain sense of recognition. For Martin-Barbero's work, issuing from the University of Cali, Colombia, has surprising affinities with the line of thought that has burgeoned in the wake of Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies. This is no accident. Undoubtedly internationalist, Martin-Barbero parallels many of the theoretical moves which have shaped the revived interest in cultural studies in the North. Thus the Frankfurt school's emphasis is prefigured with the help of the poet Benjamin; Gramsci is invoked in his familiar guise as a missionary of radical change, rather than coercion; there is an acknowledged debt to the work of William and

Further Readings.
J.J. Brau, Tradicionalismo en la cultura infantil, Santiago, Plaza, 1980.
B. Schweizer, "Nacional por asimilación," Punto de Vista, 29-996.
A. Bivalo, maestros uruguayos, Bogotá: Terne Mundial (forthcoming).

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Hoggart. The net result of this global theoretical renaissance is firmly to situate Martin-Barbero's work within a larger school of thought where emphasis on social class is deemed to be of prime concern. The main thrust of his work is to explore the ways in which social class shapes, and is shaped by, the cultural production of a society.

Martin-Barbero argues that the concept of the bourgeoisie, which is the class that dominates the cultural production of a society, is fundamentally different from the concept of the bourgeoisie in classical Marxist theory. He argues that the concept of the bourgeoisie is not simply a class defined by economic interests, but is also defined by cultural and ideological interests. This is because the bourgeoisie not only produces culture, but also uses it to legitimize its power and to maintain its position of dominance.

Martin-Barbero's work is significant because it challenges the traditional Marxist view of culture as a reflection of economic base. Instead, he argues that culture is a dynamic force in its own right, and that it has the ability to shape and be shaped by economic and social conditions. This is a significant contribution to the study of culture, and it has important implications for our understanding of the relationship between culture and society.