Farewell to critique?: past and present of theory and method in mass communication research

Adeus à crítica? Passado e presente da teoria e método na pesquisa em comunicação de massa

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ABSTRACT
Critical research in mass communication has progressed at theoretical and practical level in several areas of knowledge: political economy, cultural studies, analytical social psychology, social history, discourse analysis, etc., in the wake of what has been presented as a new form of social science, the critical one, under the influence of cultural Marxism and, by this way, of the "critical theories." This article rationally reconstructs central aspects of the development of these problematics, aiming to show the constitutive impasses that result from the interference of a very rigid and dogmatic theory, currently very degraded, in a scientific research program that, it is believed, would not yet have exhausted its epistemic and reflexive potential.
Keywords: Mass communication research, epistemology, critical theory, research methodology in mass communication, Marxism

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RESUMO
A pesquisa crítica em comunicação de massa progrediu teórica e praticamente em várias áreas do conhecimento: economia política, estudos culturais, psicologia social analítica, história social, análise do discurso etc., a reboque do que se apresentou como uma nova forma de ciência social, a crítica, sob a influência da devida teorização e, assim, do marxismo cultural. O artigo reconstrói racionalmente aspectos centrais do desenvolvimento desta problemática, visando mostrar os impasses constitutivos que resultam da interferência de um tipo de teorização muito rígido e dogmático, de resto bem degradada atualmente, em programa de pesquisa científica que, acredita-se, ainda não teria esgotado seu potencial epistêmico e reflexivo.
Palavras-chave: Pesquisa em comunicação de massa, epistemologia, teoria crítica, metodologia da pesquisa em comunicação de massa, marxismo

ORIGINATING IN GERMANY and the United States, mass communication studies developed, in the second country, based on the philosophy of natural sciences, on positivist epistemological premises; supported by the behaviorist paradigm and, therefore, by the methods and techniques of empirical social research (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2022). As the 1970s progressed, however, another perspective gradually began to emerge. More or less everywhere, "communication research" became, first, the object of reservations (Mattelart, 1976; Nordenstreng, 1968) and then of increasing opposition by emerging sectors in academia (Barbero, 1978, p. 17-48; Beltrán, 1976/1985; Bisky, 1982; De la Haye & Miège, 1978; Gitlin, 1978; Golding & Murdock, 1978). The political dispute and ideological contestation (Holzer, 1969; Schiller, 1996), the struggle for appropriation and control, if not of the means, at least of their meaning (which has bordered its development since the beginning) have been placed within the university, certainly timidly.

Marked by the political turmoil that began a little earlier, a new generation of scholars emerged, as has been said, interested in developing study alternatives to the dominant paradigm from the point of view informed by Marxism (Holzer, 1973; Garnham, 1979). In Latin America, Western Europe and the United States, political economy, cultural studies, sociology of organizations, social history, analytical psychology, and materialist semiotics (Hardt, 1992, pp. 173-216; Pietilä, 2005, pp. 221-244;), focusing on communications as a business and a means of ideological domination, developed av work that, around 1980, would pave the way for the return of what had been called, four decades earlier, critical research in mass communication.

Apparently, critical research in mass communication was an expression coined originally by Paul Lazarsfeld to characterize the epistemological attitude and work proposed by his colleague Theodor Adorno within the framework of the radio study project in the United States, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, together with Princeton University (Jenemann, 2007), in the late 1930s. For the first scholar, its main methodological difference concerning empirical research would be that, instead of focusing on the analysis of isolated variables of the phenomenon under study with empirical and statistical methods, the task in critical research is to interpret them in light of the historical trends present in the respective social system with theoretical instruments (Lazarsfeld, 1941, pp. 8-9).

Supported by Horkheimer's manifesto (1941/1989), Adorno and Lowenthal, for a whole generation, accepted the judgment made by Lazarsfeld, albeit rejecting the terminological framework. Thus, apparently, apart from one or

two mentions (Gerbner, 1958; Nordenstreng, 1968), the expression of critical research in mass communication and, in particular, the activity itself remained practically inoperative until the mid-1970s. Adorno was always hostile to the theoretical use of the term communication in academic and philosophical activity, unilaterally accusing it of being ideological. He explored radically different epistemological problems, using the concept of cultural industry, as seen in his essays on newspaper horoscope columns, jazz, and television serial fiction. For him, social research in mass communication, focusing primarily on empirical stimuli and reactions, would always be positivist given the theoretical framework in which it was constituted (Adorno, 2001, pp. 124-125).

Building on the political and intellectual wave that, referred to, among others, by the names of Marcuse and Habermas, had come to project the term "critical theory" among left-wing academic circles during the 1970s, the emerging subjects in the area of mass media, in their own way, maintained the above argument. They appropriated the notion of critical research without adhering to the epistemological invalidation of the concept of reference made by the Frankfurt philosopher. When, in the early 1980s, critical research in mass communication began to be addressed again, the phenomenology of the cultural industry that Adorno proposed with Horkheimer's endorsement would only enter the repertoire as a memorialistic reference.

At this time, mass communication studies, relatively consolidated as an autonomous academic area in the United States, were also beginning to achieve this elsewhere. Apart from the ideological climate favorable to the adoption of the concept promoted by the industry itself by its most direct stakeholders, the professionals, and entrepreneurs in the area, it was seen that it was more advantageous to maintain the label and, thus, the illusion of epistemological autonomy that accompanied its academic rise rather than leaving the study of the subject to established disciplines. Vincent Mosco summarized the thinking behind the new line of studies, reporting that:

> Critical research starts from the view that most established systems of power restrict the ability of people to free themselves for self-determination. Critical research examines the historical forces that bring about and change systems of communication power. It is continuously sensitive to the need to connect communication problems to the wider institutional system of power and resistance. (Mosco, 1989, cited in Lent, 1995, p. 173)

It was, however, Jennifer Slack and Martin Allor (1983) who, in the mythical issue 3 of volume 33 of the *Journal of Communication*, entitled

"Ferment in the Field," exposed the best methodological synthesis on the subject made to date, as we will point out later. As they say, critical research should not be seen as a unified school and is a bundle of reflective and empirical approaches to mass communication phenomena, in which political economy, cultural studies, discourse analysis, social history, etc., would be explored. It would be a heterogeneous epistemological and political movement, however, possessing common elements, such as, firstly, the philosophical and methodological opposition to the behaviorist paradigm and its communicational schemes and, secondly, the proposal to focus studies on analyzing the role of communications in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of power relations in society, from a fair and emancipatory perspective for human beings (Slack & Allor, 1983).

In what follows, first, we will analytically reconstruct how critique presented itself and came to be theorized in communicational thinking originating from academia, and, secondly, test the resistance and validity of its propositions, pointing out the problems arising from its use in research, with a view to, on another occasion, developing what we intend to be its correctives. After the crisis of Marxism and the collapse of communist regimes at the end of the last century, critique itself came into question among its most serious stakeholders. It was argued about the need "to re-examine its concepts and procedures, its genealogy and the way it was intertwined with the logic of social emancipation"[1] (Rancière, 2012, pp. 48-49) (Callinicos, 2006; Hoy & McCarthy, 1994).

At the turn of the century, as interpreted and transmitted by Marcuse (1969), critical theory, as militancy, gained new momentum, infiltrating broad sectors of professional life and, more diffusely, through social networks. A new intellectual scenario emerged in which critique was practically and theoretically reduced to opposition, strategy, and attack. In these pages, we want to address this situation, starting from the premise that, in science, critique only has philosophical validity as a form of study, analysis, and clarification: using it as a weapon, as we have seen, only serves to degrade the university (Weber. 1919/1970).

Like what happens in other areas, critique has once again become present in the academic area of communication. However, the fact that there is no discussion about it gives food for thought. The hypothesis that critique is being reduced to ideology cannot be discarded by those who do not give up thought. The crisis continues in silence. The fact that it does not reverberate does not mean there are no effects on academic *praxis*. The advancement of a low-level professionalism proud of its cosmetic commitment to social causes is remarkable.

[1] In the original: "del reexamen de sus conceptos y de sus procedimientos, de su genealogía y de la manera en que se han entrelazado con la lógica de la emancipación social."

Among Brazilians, Eugênio Trivinho and André Lemos were perhaps the only ones to address the problem of critique in the area of communication seriously. However, the way they faced it was different. For Lemos (2015), examining the subject would indicate that critique has exhausted its cognitive potential in research and must give way to more promising alternatives. On the contrary, Trivinho (2001, pp. 163-185) did not consider it dead, accusing the unsustainability of continuing to support the critique of the myth of absolute reason and the philosophy of history[2].

The report that follows deepens the clarification of the roots of the problem and analytically develops the colleague's perspective, inserting itself in the proposal that he calls the categorical renewal of critique in social research in mass communication, however, without being able to show, on this occasion, how the dogmatic stagnation and academic populism in which it is trapped can, in theory, be reversed.

[2] Our first evaluation of Trivinho's work is in Rüdiger (2007). We debated with André Luiz in Rüdiger (2015). Ossandón et al. (2019) provide elements to think about the subject in Latin America.

ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE NOTION OF CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

Underlying the advancement of so-called critical research in the academic area of mass communication during the 1980s is a much broader movement, which takes account of the notion of critical social science with which, a few years earlier, Jürgen Habermas had proposed the development in Germany and outlined the epistemological justification to a program of scientific work for academic Marxism that emerged in the West after World War II (Strydom, 2011). Adorno and Horkheimer, his professors, had begun, back in the 1940s, to reject the version of Marxism that, together with Marcuse, the latter had proposed under the title of *critical theory*. Habermas even thought, in the 1960s, of "systematically developing the program of what could one day be called critical and dialectical social research," as suggested by Adorno (2001, p. 99)[3]. However, redirecting his interests toward elaborating a theory of communicative action would only develop, especially in the work of his Anglo-Saxon interpreters, from the 1970s onwards.

[3] In the original: "desarollar sistemáticamente el programa de lo que quizá alguna vez se denomine investigación social crítica y dialéctica".

Alvin Gouldner provides us with the elements that must be considered to understand the subject, observing that Marxism developed intellectually for more than a century from two lines of thought: scientific and philosophical ("cultural"). Supported by the critique of the political economy made by Marx and Engels' philosophy of science, the first proved to be predominant, as it became a reference for the Soviet regime and the communist parties aligned with it worldwide. Taking strength from the writings of Lukács and Korsch, the second, on the contrary, grew with the exploration of the political and

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philosophical writings of the young Marx, ending up predominating among the intellectualized middle classes of the West (Gouldner, 1983; Kolakowski, 2022; Merquior, 1987).

Just like *the philosophy of praxis*, a term used in prison by Gramsci, the *critical theory of society* served, in the 1930s, for Horkheimer and Marcuse to cipher the expositions and analyses of Marxist thought they made in that last sense. The Frankfurt School was clear that "Marx and Engels conceived the critical theory of society" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1966, p. 254). At least initially, this expression was a disguised way of referring to his understanding of Marxism. Since the reappearance of the text in 1968, it has become customary to take *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937) as the founding manifesto of a new social and political thought from the Frankfurt School. However, upon careful examination, it appears that his propositions had little originality relative to the ideas of Lukács and Korsch.

Breaking relatively little with the Marxist orthodoxy represented by the dialectical materialism of the communist parties during that period, the title means, or should actually be read, as "Marxism and Science," part of a set in which Horkheimer and Marcuse aimed to broaden the field discussion of Marxist philosophy. Like other Frankfurtians, both refused to adhere to the philosophy of science made official by the Soviet regime, i.e., to naturalistic materialism, even if "dialectical." It means that, in Horkheimer's view, endorsed to the end by Marcuse, the critical theory of society, that is, non-Soviet Marxism, should not be confused with sociology. Intending to transform it into a social Science (Bukharin, 1922/1970) was, to say the least, "a venture fraught with serious difficulties" (Horkheimer, 1990, p. 268). No matter how advanced they are, social sciences are limited to knowing and intervening in reality from essentially analytical and technological points of view. They deal with the experience in a fragmented way, even when they offer proposed solutions to their problems. Only the political action of a rooted social movement, guided by theory supported by overall analysis, as would be the case of Marxism, can diagnose and transform society (Horkheimer, 1990, p. 261).

With the establishment of the Institute for Social Research in the United States, the understanding of the Soviet regime as a manifestation of the Authoritarian State advanced and, with the replacement of Marcuse by Adorno as Horkheimer's primary collaborator, this entire vision, however, began to disintegrate. Following Adorno, Horkheimer moved from Marxism to the "critical philosophy" of the culture defended by the new partner. On the other hand, however, he was forced, by circumstances, to establish a kind

of discourse on the method of social science with which his group intended to compete for space in the North American academic world. The seminars held by the collective led to the transformation of the dialectical method into a hermeneutics of historical experience, according to which the context in which, inevitably, the facts of our interest are inserted can be grasped in theory, and this provides the means to interpret its evidence and decipher its meaning (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1999, pp. 105-128, 2013, pp. 140-150).

In short, this contributed to the emergence of the epistemological concept of critical social research. According to it, knowledge is expressed through concepts whose nature is historical, critical, hermeneutic, and totalizing. The premise is that the phenomenon under study acquires different meanings according to how its subjects adjust to historically changing scenarios due to their connections with all others whose presence can be attested.

> The categories we intend to use are not generalizations to be attained by a process of abstraction from various individuals and species, nor are they axiomatic definitions and postulates. The process of forming these categories must take into account the historical character of the subject matter to which they pertain and in such a way that the categories are made to include the actual genesis of that subject matter. (Horkheimer, 1941/1989, p. 264)

The subjects being studied are influenced and transformed by ongoing social and historical processes in a broad sense, as the contexts in which they act correlate with others, according to a presumably totalizing dynamic. The empirical and inductive method of positive sciences proceeds through collecting individual data and their relationship with others to obtain general statements. Instead, the critical and dialectical approach seeks to deepen the analysis of the case to, through interpretation, identify its meaning.

Knowledge develops through the discovery of the origin and influences that originated the phenomenon within the scope of the totality of its relationships, of increasingly comprehensive configurations, until reaching its historical and theoretical significance (Horkheimer, 1941/1989, p. 265). For it not to sound dogmatic and to be able, with it, to reach a diagnosis of the situation experienced by its subjects, the latter must be judged according to the dominant ideas and thoughts in the context and at the time instead of based on formal schemes, freely established by the researcher (Horkheimer, 1941/1989, p. 266).

From this perspective developed the successive writings with which Adorno would methodologically defend what, more precisely, he came to call

critical sociology (Benzer, 2011) rather than the *theory of society*—but not the late work of Marcuse (1970, 1969). It occurred after Adorno initiated himself in the methods of empirical social research and introduced his practice in post-war Germany. Both agreed with Horkheimer (1990, p. 9) regarding the critical theory of society, which faced the advance of the totalitarian state and administered society. However, it did not lose "relation with the present" and began to demand "a reflection much more judicious." After all, the proletariat, its supposed subject, first integrated and then virtually disappeared as a class in established society, with the democratizing political reforms and technological development promoted by capitalism, except for the requirement to start relating concepts such as domination and imperialism with communist countries (p. 10).

On the other hand, the authors profoundly differed concerning the philosophical attitude to be taken when faced with the problem. Adorno (1964/2019, p. 27) concluded that, as "the very notion of theory of society, in the sense of system, has become extremely problematic" (see also Wiggershaus, 1995, pp. 564-566), it would be the case, at least temporarily, to start investing in the development of critical sociology supported by a combination of the dialectical method with what he, inspired by Walter Benjamin, called *micrology* (Adorno, 1964/2019). Marcuse (1970/2001, pp. 121-161), on the contrary, ended up discovering in the social and political movements that emerged from the end of the 1960s reasons to, breaking once and for all with Marxism, propose a new critical theory, articulate what he called the Cultural Revolution.

CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE AND MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH – TOWARD METHODOLOGY

Since it is impossible to detail it in this article, we will only express the hypothesis that critical social science was, as stated, the notion with which Habermas negotiated this dispute between the old Frankfurtians in favor of Adorno, speculating on the epistemological terms necessary to create a substitute for the academic Marxism in vogue in the second half of the 20th century, without completely giving up the social cause, the preferential option for the dominated, the emancipation project, as its subjects said[4].

According to him, the efforts of social research, instead of being oriented only toward institutions, can also do so in order to stimulate self-reflection, if not of the subjects studied themselves, of the public interested in knowing about their problems and lending them political support. It starts from the

[4] For reasons of space, the process that, starting with Habermas himself, would lead to the understanding of critical social science as essentially theoretical knowledge and, thus, to, equally in our understanding, converge, on a more sophisticated level, with the version of orthodox scientific Marxism proposed by Althusser during the 1960s, will be left aside in the discussion (see also Strydom, 2011).

premise that social sciences can, in theory, help audiences to free themselves intellectually from dependence on inhibiting circumstances that reify them. Marxism and psychoanalysis show that they eventually allow themselves to be moved by an emancipatory interest concerning the established order, and not just by a technical interest in the domination of our circumstances, in the search for intellectual control of institutions, and the reproduction of cultural traditions (Habermas, 1963/1987, p. 297, pp. 139-140)[5].

Social scientists are not prevented from theoretically keeping the subjects' point of view in focus in their studies, as positivism sometimes postulates, and, thus, from developing analyses that are intended to be able to guide becoming aware of alienating situations, if not subjection, from an emancipatory point of view, as would be observed in the knowledge mentioned above, and could be the case in several other areas of study, without excluding research in mass communication[6].

Lee Harvey uses terms in a way that, as will be questioned, reveals the damage that a structural theory of domination can bring to knowledge and research. However, he summarizes well that, within the framework of this philosophy of science:

> Critical social research is underpinned by a critical-dialectical perspective which attempts to dig beneath the surface of historically specific, oppressive, social structures. This is contrasted with positivistic concerns to discover the factors that cause observed phenomena . . . and with phenomenological attempts to interpret the meanings of social actors or attempt close analysis of symbolic processes or to build grand theoretical edifices. (Harvey, 1990, p. 4)

According to this perspective, let us focus on the area of communication. Research within the empirical, positivist social science framework generally employs abstract, linear, and simplified conceptual schemes, reducing study problems to behavioral issues. It assumes that it can explain how individuals communicate and the effects, taking as a reference, i.e., analysis variables, isolated situations in a supposedly experimental way, getting lost in abstractions. The broader processes in which media and individuals are objectively inserted are considered marginally reduced to socioeconomic indicators, status markers, ethnicity, and other items.

Furthermore, the empirical-analytical social investigation is governed by the principle of axiological autonomy and specialized professional competence, worrying excessively about the formalization of methods and the accuracy of results without asking about their scope and significance in

[5] Habermas (1963/1987, pp. 216-272) also selectively appropriates Marxism at this time, thinking of it as "critique" instead of "science" and even "philosophy." However, he never went so far as to denounce it, together with psychoanalysis, as a system of power in the Foucauldian sense.

[6] Unless there is better information, the first person to speak of human and mass communication as an object of critical social science, applied, in this case, to the area of education, was Dieter Baacke (1973). Baacke proceeded to synthesize the theories of Habermas, Luhmann, and cyberneticists, becoming known for practically and theoretically developing the concept of *communicative competence* from the former's work. At the same time, Harry Pross proposed the liberal critical theory of public communication (publicism), which was short-lived (Rüdiger, 2019, pp. 157-168).

the historical context and political life. It tends to provide service to forces that wish to use social knowledge without worrying about the interests of others and sometimes even aim to influence their attitudes and thoughts, despite their conscience and decision in this regard (Simpson, 1994).

"Critical" research carried out within the framework of political economy, cultural studies, social history, sociology of organizations, and discourse analysis, on the contrary, moves within another paradigm, ideally characterized by investing in theoretical reflection and exploration of interpretative procedures, without giving up the conduct of empirical studies and analyses. The focus, in this case, is on concrete problems and their selection according to political criteria, but the role of theoretical activity is not minimized as long as it avoids getting lost in formal and methodological abstractions (McAnany, 1981, pp. 3-20; Splichal, 1989).

On the other hand, critical social science would be theoretically characterized by the concern with examining and reporting concrete and substantial problems. It would not be primarily concerned with the methods and logic of research processes. The research considers history without being narrative and factual. It maintains a practical orientation, in the sense of feeling engaged in a more comprehensive political project and intending to contribute, with its work, to the transformation of society (George, 2022).

In research of interest for mass communication, this means that, ultimately, the critical perspective gives up on the simple and isolatable concepts of sender, message, and receiver.

> On the one hand, this is because media institutions and the processes of mass communication are viewed as inseparably intertwined with other social institutions and processes (e.g., the state, the family, and economic organization). On the other hand, this is because human individuals are viewed at first and foremost as members of social groups defined by material social location (differentiated, for example, by class, gender, race, and subculture). The communication process, then, is no longer defined in terms of the effects of messages on individuals but on the effectivity (or social role) of communication (as both institutional structures and symbolic constructions) in maintaining, enhancing, or disrupting the social formation (the existing interrelationships of politics, economics, and culture). (Slack & Allor, 1983, p. 214)

Supported by Golding and Murdock (1977), Nicholas Garnham (1979) went, in the United Kingdom, to the point of rehearsing the systematization of the foundations of the Marxist analysis of the political economy of mass

communication. Slack and Allor (1983) based their propositions on a critical perspective that they lacked to argue that information flows are not merely filtered by the social groups in which the individual is supposedly inserted.

> Encoded media messages, class relations, and subcultural lifestyles are viewed as separate levels of social formation. The interrelationship between these levels is complex and often contradictory. The outcome is not predetermined. Rather, the outcome is determined during the struggle over social meaning between dominant and subordinate groups. This is not the substitution of multiple, interactive, isolatable causes (as in regression analysis) for cause because the individual levels have no identity or effectivity outside of their interrelationship. The causal determinant is itself determined by the character of the interrelationship, not the sum of its elements. In this sense, communication has no identity or effects outside the concrete instances within which the struggle for meaning occurs. (Slack & Allor, 1983, p. 215)

On the other hand, the authors correct the formalism contained in many propositions made regarding the control and even oppression of consciences, carried out through the media, using, in their case, the Gramscian historical-hermeneutic scheme of clarification of relations of power in democratic regimes, initially explored to study culture by Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School. Communications cannot be analyzed in an isolated and atomistic way and must be situated in systemic contexts, but these are contradictory and admit changes. In theory, the processes and means are controlled and exploited by social sectors prone to caring for and imposing only their interests, to the detriment of the most fragile groups—but this cannot be absolutized.

> In Marxist cultural studies, power is conceptualized in terms of hegemony. The concept of hegemony designates a model of power that revolves around the idea of social knowledge in the production of rule by consent. Rather than focusing on state actions (involving the police, the courts, the military etc.), it focuses on the effectivity of communication in the maintenance of social control. The mass media, and the systems of representations that they produce, are analyzed for their effectivity in determining understandings of the social world. Put in other terms, hegemony describes the practices through which subordinate classes or subcultures come to understand themselves and the social whole in terms laid down by the dominant classiculture. (Slack & Allor, 1983, p. 216)

It means, in our appropriation and reading, that although the media can be used as adjuncts to immediate physical violence, they serve as instruments

in campaigns of collective persecution and murders, as seen, for example, during the genocide in Rwanda or periods of terror in communist regimes, the case does not authorize, as does radical militancy, outside and within academia (Agger, 1998; Fuchs, 2011), to theoretically define them as means of oppression. The premise according to which subjects are unequally subjected to an order in which there are the dominant and the dominated, through mechanisms of power that make material and ideological use of the means and processes of mass communication, should not only avoid the radicalism of confusing it with oppression and violence but it must be considered case by case and relativized by admitting other hypotheses, if what matters is developing knowledge.

The generic and linear phenomenologies about "communication" and "mass culture," although "critical," are as pernicious as the militant and crude rhetoric about class oppression, electronic surveillance, structural racism, symbolic violence, the social injustice of which they would be the stage, etc. The first ones are based on vague notions but with a supposedly bombastic effect, such as a simulacrum, hyperconnectivity, spectacle, speed, tiredness, excitement, and super-industry of the imagination when trying to defend a point of view using a few illustrations. The second is characterized by the creation of concepts such as weapons and means of intimidation, which are little or nothing critical, in the analytical sense, suitable for empirical and scientific research work, as they basically serve militancy.

Both are acceptable due to their inevitability, whether in essays aimed at literate circles, in the case of the first, or in party struggles to influence politically in public life and, increasingly, within institutions, in the case of the second, however, not in the research practice, as such devices lack empirical-analytical operability and historical-interpretative fertility. They imprison thought in rhetorical straitjackets and phenomenological circuits of a potentially delusional nature, shielding it from various experiences, contact with the diverse, and the adventure of research and discovery. In general, they do not go beyond exposing condemnatory judgments and generic alarmist reports, which add little to what their ideal recipients already admit, and the others, perhaps, assimilate with reticence.

Proposals consistent with the academic and scientific work that we can associate with critical research presuppose and recommend exploring theoretical issues but cannot lose contact with experience, carrying out historical analyses, and elaborating specific concepts. Critical research that ignores or disagrees with experience becomes a prisoner of ideologies. It does no better than empirical social research devoid of problems relevant to the

experience of the broader historical subject, restricted to the researcher's insertion sector in the scientific community.

The critical analysis of mass communication phenomena is methodologically outlined insofar as, instead of placing labels, it abstractly acknowledges situations through the use of abstract categories (sensationalism, for example), focuses on their immediate and generic aspects (the news on the moment, for example) and then, exploring the concrete connections that permeate it, proceed to its historical and sociological interpretation (the marketing planning of the journalistic company, the collapse of a public policy, etc.) (cf. Harvey, 1990, p. 32).

Despite insisting on talking about domination, violence, and oppression, the scholars who advocate a methodological approach in which media phenomena are seen as mediation of political, economic, social, religious, Family, and other conflicts are right, instead of in an imposing way of a system previously defined by some theory. In the latter case, critical thinking generally only has the name printed on a t-shirt the party distributes for use by acolytes. As Kellner (1995) says, critical research in mass communication and cultural studies, at its best, opposes the treatment of situations as a simple product of the domination of one system or group over others as a result of ideological manipulation by dominant on the dominated, analyzing them as an interface "within existing socio-political debates and conflicts rather than just in relation to some supposed monolithic ideology" (p. 103) (cf. Daros, 2022).

Hegemony takes various forms, manifests itself at different times, and has no owner. It is an object of dispute and conquest. It is always subject to discussion, negotiation, attack, and subversion from different political points of view. The methodological premise of analyzing the media that assists in negotiating is that people, to a certain extent, manipulate the media rather than being manipulated by them. Communication and culture represent social mediations. They articulate experiences, events, discourses, and processes and, therefore, are also always mediated. Communications, to function, need to resonate socially and fit into the subjects' horizons at all ends, working, even if unevenly, with fears, hopes, fantasies, interests, and other variables. Social life is not reduced to a system of domination. It is only exceptionally composed of oppression and violence; it involves negotiation, exchanging advantages, persuasion, convergences of thought, temporary alliances, dialogue, etc. The phenomena, therefore, require multivalent readings from preferably contradictory perspectives, originating from the subjects themselves instead of the owner of the truth that those who carry out critical research in mass communication often consider themselves to be.

IS CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE CRITICAL THEORY OF MASS COMMUNICATION?

Following the above path seems promising in methodological terms; however, we need to note that it puts the theoretical perspective into crisis and, thus, the very concepts with which critique was introduced and has been used in mass communication research until now. Whenever it comes to social sciences and the concept of "critique" comes into play, it is worth remembering that it is necessary to distinguish between its theoretical use in political philosophy and its use in science as an epistemological key. The first concerns, more generally, the doctrinal principles with which we can guide ourselves and intervene in social and political life. The second concerns the theoretical principles with which the analysis and reporting of the matter under investigation can be structured and developed. The fact that there may occasionally be exchanges and mediation between them does not serve as an excuse to confuse them from a functional point of view. Social science, without a doubt, involves the intervention of doctrinal principles in its work, as long as they are subject to empirical and documentary proof and do not violate or fraud experience.

Critical social science, being no exception, is based on the premise that the latter, critique, is constitutive of specialized scientific practice. Phenomenological reports of a broad and generic nature, exploring abstract concepts with the addition of a few illustrations, would belong to another genre. The critical perspective should not serve as a license for its subjects to express themselves without discipline, venting their frustrations against the world. The concepts that distinguish it must be analyzed empirically based on evidence collected methodically. The main ones, in the case of the area of communication, have been domination and, to a lesser extent, ideology since its theoretical orientation, generally speaking, has a normative and more or less holistic nature, embodying itself in the idea of communication free of one and the other, i.e., emancipated.

However, is it sustainable that it could be like this, as so many exponential names in research and critical theory in mass communication still advocate today, including, paradoxically, Douglas Kellner himself (2020)? Although its creator only referred to it punctually, the reception of Habermas's notion of critical social science, initially noted mainly in the United States (Fay, 1987), was strongly influenced by Marcuse's review of critical theory, not sparing academic research in mass communication. The problem is that it sealed its link, renewed to this day, with the concepts of domination and oppression, sometimes with that of ideology, to the detriment of others,

much more plastic, rich and fruitful, as can be if worked analytically, the concepts of power and hegemony.

The first terms were mechanically assimilated at their Marcusian face value as experiences indisputably lived by all social groups, although not always in the same way. The task imposed on scholars who have not lost their freedom of conscience became to fight intellectually against this situation, studying and producing knowledge about how and with whom it arose, how it is structured, how and who it oppresses and alienates, what resistances and struggles that it gives rise to, how, finally, the emancipation of all this will be achieved, a new form of society, considering the themes of "communication."

The works of current exponents of theory and critical research in mass communication, such as Christian Fuchs and Fabien Granjon, prove this. According to Lee Harvey (1990, p. 19), "Critical social research is a methodology, not a political creed" (see also Morrow, 1994). Despite existing, the relationship with practical philosophy, i.e., critical theory, must be mediated, considering what is specific to it as a scientific instrument. For Granjon and George (2014, pp. 291-355) and Fuchs (2011, pp. 112-121), advocates of their orthodox understanding, on the contrary, research and study are political actions, they have started and, in their view, this is Marxism. Media studies represent one of the fields of application of critical theory and, as such, constitute an articulation of strategic analysis (i.e., political and economic), empirical research (to support the analysis), and socialist ethics (anti-capitalist orientation). The theory uses the dialectical method as a weapon to analyze media and culture from the point of view of overthrowing the "context of domination," suppressing "control, exploitation, oppression" (Fuchs, 2011, 2022; Granjon, 2015a, 2015b)[7].

The point that arises for discussion in this article consists of knowing whether and how this perspective—directly indebted to Marxism, not to mention those coming from post-Marxist, "identitarian" critical theories, with which that first one even began to mix—still realizes, if it ever did, the epistemological role that it must play in research, it resists the analysis that it is urgent to do amid the post-critical scene that has emerged for reflection on the social sciences and the theory of science from the end of the last century.

Trivinho (2001) took part in this work a few years ago, highlighting that, in the current situation, it has become vital for critique to divest itself of anthropology, i.e., "the ideologizing naturalizations of human life, the universalization of theoretical premises for all times, the search for ahistorical constants, for the essence of phenomena, for ultimate truth, for unitarisms underlying processes of nature, culture and society" (p. 167). As well as

[7] Due to lack of space, it is impossible to present here, as we intended, a detailed analysis of the theses and works of these authors. In 2016, *Questions de Communication* published a critical dossier regarding Granjon's perspective. His response was published in issue 30 of the same year ("Des échelles de la critique," pp. 181-218). We did not find a comprehensive discussion of Fuchs' already vast work. Christoph Raetzch (2016) focuses on some generalizable objections when commenting on a title.

dialectics, since there is no longer any way to maintain in discourse without falling into dogmatism, the figure of the totalizing subject of *praxis*, the notion of historical transcendence, the idea of universal emancipation, the fantasy of epistemological omnipotence (p. 166)—and, we would add, the claim to exclusivity in the legitimate handling of the concept of ideology.

In his view, the purge of critique underway, in theory, can be prevented by adopting a situational strategy of an essayistic nature, whose essentially abstract orientation, however, sterilizes it in our assessment. Apart from leaving aside the examination of his methodology, concepts, and operational schemes in social research, Trivinho (2001) contradicted his critique of the comprehensive cognition of real totalities. He succumbed to the inflationary vertigo of theory, reducing experience to abstract formulas of little or no use, whether in political philosophy or the theory of science. In what follows, we will resume his work on this last level, taking his reflection on the situation of critique to the level of methodology, starting by drawing attention to the damage that, in research, represents the stereotyping of concepts that would have turned our colleague into a victim, in our judgment.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CRITICAL THEORY IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

After all, does it happen or not that critical concepts are found in a hermeneutic register in historical and ethnographic research, as they are subject to empirical control, or do they succumb to dogmatism? For us, the fact that, in critical research, theory has, until now, artificially provided the categories that allow not only evaluation but also show the pathologies of mass communication and, sometimes, even its remedies are problematic. Thus, research, paradoxically, began to reify its analyses, mainly because, in mass communication studies, at least, they tend to be discussed rarely. The rule is to take them from neighboring areas at face value, ready for more or less mechanical application to the commentary, much more than the analysis, of the themes under investigation (see also the essays collected in Cirucci & Vacker, 2018).

Taking a random research report for illustration, it appears that, according to colleagues, "identity movements" would sometimes privilege "recognition" over "critique" when confronting audiovisual production with themes of their interest. Its analysis would show that, as predicted by Axel Honneth, "subalternate groups" undertake a "struggle for recognition" since their main

objective would be "representation." The "axiological convictions" of these groups are the basis of a "common semantics" on which a "grammar" of the struggle for recognition would be founded (Serelle & Sena, 2019).

However, what is the proof of this? We could not find it leafing through the article. The case under analysis seems, in principle, documented. The connection between its evidence and theoretical judgment, however, is arbitrary. In our view, the evidence does not authorize speaking of a "struggle for recognition." The case under study exemplifies what is illuminated or explained through the abovementioned theory. The problem, it is worth noting, is not theoretically perfectly capable of exposition, illustration, and discussion. The recognition theory is no longer new. It has sparked discussion and has been assimilated by some scholars to a certain extent. The question is its use in research on the production and reception of contemporary Brazilian audiovisuals.

Barring better judgment or due empirical, rather than rhetorical, binding, the only epistemological justification for using it, in that situation, would be to put it to the test, aiming to correct or improve it, perhaps even refuting it. The method would have to be critical or abductive rather than deductive, as is wrongly suggested. The main focus, objective, or interest could not be to explain the phenomenon since, in the course of the argument, the latter is logically reduced to a pretext for exemplifying the theory.

The example serves us, therefore, as a starting point to deepen the analysis of the problems arising from the connection between theory and research claimed until now by critical studies in mass communication. The first thing to consider is that, in general, critical theories paradoxically predetermine the significance of the phenomena under study, crypto dogmatically stating that these are always or only matter as phenomena of struggle, oppression, domination, and resistance. The possibility of them having another meaning, whether for their subjects or other interpreters when considered, tends to be ignored using the ideology thesis (Turner et al., 1981). The argument is conducted as if there were and it itself was in an immunized place, in which the more or less sublimated resistance that it itself represents would be expressed as a free and sovereign conscience.

The suggestion that oppression and domination can be found everywhere but among scholars and critical intellectuals, in their practices and in the institutions they curate, in the political regimes with which they identify, is often a classic case of ideology. The will to power is not the privilege of any social group, just as, in principle, it is not a critical activity—neither one nor the other should be fetishized if thought is to be kept free.

Its dialectic can include several perverse relationships at different levels of implementation, regardless of social class, religious confession, professional status, political creed, sexual orientation, gender, color, etc. The phenomena of conduct monitoring, attempted subjugation from a distance, political censorship, and ideological persecution ("cancel culture") via social networks, for example, are more or less democratic. They arise from the convergence of multiple interests and reciprocal injunctions and not from the "system" or supposed "structure" on which blame can be placed, whether due to malice or pure and simple stupidity.

Who, how, and with what right stipulates that, in the critical analysis of media phenomena, we deal, by definition, with forms of oppression and domination? We have long known that if we wish to give any relevance to concepts such as these, they cannot be framed in such a way as to identify with the totality of social life since, short of invoking transcendent wisdom and power, there would be no way to explain the propriety of our discourse, due to the lack of exemption from our standpoint. Thus, we need to postulate or, at least, presuppose a place relatively safe from the problem to make the judgment—however, who and how ensures that, in existing such a place, the judgment is correct and thus justified if the concepts of reference are essentially interpretive, are they not, as is often made out to be, given and evident facts?

Except by appealing to the dogmatic insurance represented by the monopolistic application of the concept of ideology against opponents, critical theories cannot deny that they are supported by concepts that are disputable with others (for example, emancipation x individual salvation, eventually for all) and that, even if there is a decision, they are open to multiple interpretations, due to their very vague nature (for example, "democracy"). In research, concepts such as fake news and hate speech, for example, cannot be presented exclusively based on theoretical reports, needing to be justified with empirical interpretations—however, with what criteria will their appropriateness be judged in the analysis?

The repertoire of critical theories: resistance, domination, injustice, suffering, surveillance, oppression, struggle, etc., is formed by hermeneutic notions referenceable in historical situations, whose formatting must be developed reflexively to keep in view their limits, whether in its immanent plan, whether in its dealings with experience, at least during research activities. Like critique, these terms represent processes of fluctuating meaning, which resist formalization, being used and recreated according to power games and

tests of strength, and the agreements in which individuals see themselves socially inserted. Without a doubt, social life knows those processes; it is their origin, but in *praxis*, no one owns their meaning; in the medium term, no one has the power to claim their monopoly, including theory and science.

In our view, critical research is not to support or combat the phenomena of interest and curiosity from the point of view for which they took sides but to map and analyze the meaning given to them by the protagonists without predetermining it according to schemes. The categories it works with lack fixed or pre-established content; serve, in principle, for any social group. Its meaning needs to be interpreted, taking into account empirically the point of view of its historical subjects. The oppressed and oppressors, for example, should not be pre-established in theoretical discourse, firstly because those are hermeneutic categories and secondly because they are or are not data from experience. Subjects change their attitudes and opinions as they interact or change their intervention context. Well-conducted research should aim to analyze and reconstruct these processes without forcing them into rigid and watertight categories, often irrelevant to the case under observation.

Therefore, structural concepts, such as domination, among many Marxists and identity groups, have little use in research and analysis of concrete experiences, sounding critical only in manifestos. As a rule, the meaning of social action is complex for the distant observer to understand, and its scope and complexity only worsen the problem. More plastic and open terms, such as "hegemony" and "power," understood within the framework of action theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1989), do better in conducting studies that avoid losing sight of social and historical experience. Power relations do not always obey entirely only the identity logics of class, gender, race, nationality, religion, etc.—cross them. The exercise of power has never been determined solely by economic position, class situation, political affiliation, ideological creed, or ethnic sympathy, being equally influenced by the processes and dynamics of situational interactions, according to the ever-changing variables that present themselves at the moment, in addition to the overall effects, which arise from its remote reporting.

Genuine critique in social research warns us against the unilateral and dogmatic use of concepts. Histrionic statements about technology's power to corporations and governments are accepted in simplistic theorizing and amid political struggles—in the light of research, the judgment must be analyzed. It never proves to be a zero-sum game. Social *praxis* is always broader than

the concepts we can make about it, and therefore, any attempt made in this direction runs the risk of being just another gesture to control it.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Those who research free from dogmatism know that the theories and methods with which they work can become reified and that only through reflective monitoring, dialogue with experience, openness to critique, permanent review, and possible renunciations can prevent the sterilization of the whole. Critical research in mass communication developed theoretically and practically in line with the advancement of a new form of social science, critique, under the influence of cultural Marxism, especially critical theory of society[8]. The tensions arising from this connection are crucial to understanding why research still today has not freed itself from the losses resulting from its reference to stereotypical categories (domination, for example), the use of arbitrary and dogmatic concepts (ideology, for example), the maintenance of normative schemes originating from the philosophy of history (emancipation, for example), and, more generally, the lack of analytical and hermeneutical flexibility observed in conducting research.

The worst thing for science, without a doubt, however, is the tendency, among the subjects of the critical theories that have emerged in the last period, to accuse methodical research of being positivism and, preferring to speak in studies, to reduce it to illustrative expositions of concepts. Following the example of totalitarian movements of the past, instead of criticizing science as an ideology, we can see the advancement of the thesis that, ultimately, science must give way to theory ("critique") (Agger, 1992, 1998).

It means that social science or, at least, its philosophy today has before it, once again, the problem of knowing to what extent it is compatible with this kind of theory, if and how it can be articulated with critique, without ceasing to be science, without succumbing to ideological prejudices, if not to militant political discourse. Based on Marx and Weber, Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias, for example, have already responded negatively to this question. "Sociology is a science that can criticize by itself,"[9] and this has nothing to do with "critique as it is practiced in social life and political struggles"[10], except when it is corrupted in its own field (Bourdieu, 1983/2019, p. 351).

In their view, the social scientist is indeed a destroyer of myths; they criticize, but only among and for those initiated in science. Even if they, as Elias (1980) insinuates, much less being a Marxist, as Althusser wanted,

[8] Obviously, its areas of activity are not exclusive to it. Apart from other approaches, scientific Marxism can also intervene in them. Consider, for example, the cases of political economy and discourse analysis. Space limitations prevent us from developing the differences in their approaches.

[9] In the original: "la sociología es una ciencia que puede ser crítica por sí misma".

[10] In the original: "la crítica tal como se la practica cotidianamente en la vida social y en las luchas políticas."

have the power to take us out of alienation as common subjects. Social life is, by definition, dominated by power relations, belief systems, and power mechanisms, which keep people more or less in ignorance and under the command of impulses opaque to the layman. The role of social science is limited to studying its distinct phenomena, aiming to replace myths and opinions with theories that are testable, verifiable, and susceptible to correction through research, without being able to go further as a science, under penalty of falling into mystification (Elias, 1980, pp. 53-75).

As the externalist approach failed on many sides (Alexander, 1995, pp. 128-217; Ferry & Renaut, 1988, pp. 183-216; Honneth, 1995, pp. 184-203), it nevertheless emerged as an alternative to critical sociologies, but also indirectly to Marxist critical social science, the proposal to develop a "pragmatic sociology of critique," whose motive, not the meaning, deserves, in our view, attention, if it is to renew the foundation of the critical perspective in research on mass communication.

For Luc Boltanski (2011, p. 24), in effect, "to return to things themselves in the case of critique is to make one's first objective observing, describing, and interpreting situations where people engage in critique—that is, disputes" (cf. Walzer, 1987). Critical sociology, referencing the concept of social domination, is characterized by accusing and unmasking its forms, placing itself in a position of exteriority without, in the Bourdieusian case, admitting transcendence. Ordinary critique, instead, originates from the emancipatory attitude generally adopted by subjects involved in everyday disputes in the most diverse social niches. The pragmatic sociology of critique does not intend to bracket the latter to explain the conflict from the outside, much less reduce its terms to error, illusion, ideology, or half-truth (Boltanski, 2011, p. 50). Social scientists remain prohibited from taking a position on their research topic. However, they can intervene in favor of a cause, clarifying its circumstances and providing a rationalized scheme after empirically researching the struggles and disputes that arise in ordinary social life.

Therefore, the task for which they can be responsible consists of analyzing the objective situation from the subjects' point of view to bring to light and then theoretically reconstruct the situational grammar on which their daily action is based. "The pragmatic sociology of critique—starts out from actors' critical capacities and initially aims to use the means supplied by sociology to make them explicit." The second step: "Next it seeks to establish normative positions—consequently, of a metacritical kind—by basing itself

on the modeling of these ordinary critiques and the moral sense or sense of justice expressed in them" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 50).

In our view, Boltanski, like Stahl (2021), unnecessarily complicates the matter and, in a certain way, falls formally, but with less potential for concrete clarification, into the Bourdieusian stance by adding this last step. His idea that social subjects, in their variety, may be interested in or even need this type of knowledge, which is highly demanding and selective and which characterizes the tendency to understand critical social science as essentially theoretical knowledge, seems fanciful to us (Strydom, 2011)—to deepen his political orientation and continue fighting for his causes. Journalism and the organic intellectuality of social movements can do so with much more efficiency and adaptation to the circumstances. However, we do not rule out the possibility, although always potentially plural, deferred, and contradictory, of their representatives making use of the contributions of social science.

Critical research needs to accept its own modesty and its circumscription to an irrelevant audience, in statistical and political terms, if it is to avoid the slide into populism to which not only democratic politics in a mass era inevitably succumbs but now the university itself, starting with the social sciences and humanities. More than ever, artisan and differentiated knowledge (Mills, 1961) speaks to relatively few people—and it is fine, especially because today, it is more widespread, thanks to the progress of communications. The philosophy of the respective science, therefore, suggests that the critique put aside its Promethean expectations and, in case our objections to the theory are correct, give up an emancipatory perspective that did not bring it any advantage in the elaboration of knowledge and, less than utopian, became purely protocol, virtually caricatural.

To maintain critique on the horizon of social science studies and, therefore, in mass communication research, we will risk the theses, (critical) theory must, in general, give way to analytical and interpretative phenomenology; research, relativizing the truth and sparing no further analysis; emancipatory critique needs to open space for historical analysis; and the method must become even more immanent to matter, instead of being refined technically and abstractly. The survival of critique is, we believe, methodologically linked to hermeneutics rather than theory[11]—to an analytical and interpretative empiricism in which critique means social and historical contextualization of all matters under analysis and, without sparing itself, relativization of all categories that allow them to be determined.

Therefore, the researcher's first task in the critical analysis of mass communications would be to identify points of conflict and social controversies,

[11]On another occasion, we should differentiate this proposal from that with which, based on Paul Ricoeur (1986), Thompson (1995, pp. 355-421) developed his methodology of *deep hermeneutics*. Converge the perspectives of Adorno and Foucault within the framework of a critical historical and interpretative social science based on the analytical theory of action derived from Max Weber. Meanwhile, see Cook (2018), Foucault (1985, pp. 73-86, 1982, pp. 37-79), and Dreyfus & Rabinow (1984).

the subjects in the field and their reciprocal actions, their causes, and arguments, without taking sides or predetermining meanings according to their "theory." The researcher would intervene after the analysis, proposing, in the case of dealing with the present, not a grammar for the side that took sides but a judgment about what the subjects may have become after experiencing the situation and, in the general case, what learning can we extract about the categories that brought about their encounter and clashes, their misfortune and their salvation, if any. **M**

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