

## **LO POPULAR COMO SUJETO DE ESTUDIO UN REPASO DE TRADICIONES DE INVESTIGACION EN AMERICA LATINA Y AMERICA DEL NORTE<sup>(1)</sup>**

La investigación sobre comunicación en América Latina y América del Norte parece tener poco en común en cuanto se refiere a los estudios sobre cultura popular y cultura masiva. La explicación para esas perspectivas contrastantes se encuentra en las diferentes percepciones en cada región sobre el papel de la comunicación en la sociedad, en la manera como la tradición de investigación se ha apropiado de ellas y en como se representa el concepto de lo popular, así como las maneras en que se ha visto en ellas la relación entre teoría y práctica.

Adicionalmente, las condiciones históricas, sociales y económicas que conforman las industrias culturales en cada región han afectado la investigación y el interés a nivel regional, y también sus acercamientos a los problemas de cultura masiva y cultura popular.

El artículo de Riaño examina la evolución de la investigación sobre comunicación en América Latina y América del Norte. Discute los paradigmas más influyentes en la investigación en cada región. Una suposición central que guía su análisis es el papel primordial que juegan los programas de investigación en la legitimación de programas políticos vigentes. Al repaso de los paradigmas sigue una evaluación crítica de las suposiciones subyacentes en la investigación. Luego la autora presenta un análisis de la metodología empleada en cada región.

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<sup>1</sup> Abstract del artículo *The Popular as a Subject of Study: A Review of Latin American and North American Research Traditions* de Pilar Riaño. El Abstract fue elaborado y traducido por Kathleen Gladden PhD, profesora visitante de la Universidad de Pittsburgh en el Departamento de Antropología de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

En la segunda sección del artículo, Riaño presenta el marco para analizar la identidad cultural de los jóvenes como un elemento importante en el estudio de culturas populares. En este contexto se presta especial atención a la manera como los acercamientos a la cultura popular han afectado la programación y los métodos de investigación en la comunicación.

La mayoría de los análisis comparativos reseñados en el artículo evalúan la evolución del foco de la investigación en comunicación y medios masivos. Se comparan tanto las investigaciones en los Estados Unidos e Inglaterra como los acercamientos en América y Europa de los medios masivos y la investigación a la comunicación crítica. Sin embargo, comparaciones comprensivas de las tradiciones entre América Latina y América del Norte sólo aparecen hacia la mitad de la década de los ochenta.

Aunque el análisis de Riaño trata de las tradiciones de investigación en el estudio de cultura popular, se refiere en gran parte, a los análisis de medios masivos y comunicación crítica que incluyen la cultura popular como área de interés. Si bien el estudio de cultura popular integra diferentes disciplinas, en el artículo de Riaño el análisis se concentra en estudios dentro del campo de comunicaciones que han influido o impactado el estudio de cultura popular.

## **THE POPULAR AS SUBJECT OF STUDY: A Review of Latin American and North American Research Traditions.**

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Latin American and North American research in communication seems to have few commonalities in approaching issues of mass culture and popular culture.<sup>(1)</sup> Explanations for such contrasting views are founded in regional perceptions of the role of communication in a mass society, in the ways each research tradition has appropriated and represented the concept of "the popular", and in the ways they have seen the relationship between theory and practice. Additionally, the historical, social and economic conditions shaping cultural industries in each region have effected regional research interests and their approaches to the problems of mass culture and popular culture. These conditions might explain the more narrow scope and functionalist understanding of popular culture in North America versus a rather holistic and historical understanding of "cultura popular" in Latin America.

This chapter examines the evolution of communication research in Latin America and North America, and discusses the most influential research

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<sup>1</sup> Differences of approaches between the regions are currently recognized. However, this acknowledgment has largely seen studies on Popular culture in each region as two separate fields of study. This is the view, for example, contained in the Editorial letter to contributors of the *Journal Studies on Latin American Popular Culture*. It states: "By Popular Culture, we generally do not mean "cultura popular" or folk culture. By popular culture we do mean -and this is only the most tentative of definitions- some aspects of culture which are accepted by or consumed by significant numbers of people" (University of Arizona). It is my view that without attempting to analyze the origins and influences in shaping such divergent approaches in each region, a comparative framework that allows regional exchange and critical analysis seems impossible.

<sup>2</sup> The usage of the notion of "paradigm" in this thesis is based on Marcus and Fischer (1986) definition: "an established set of questions that are to be answered by a research program" see Marcus and Fischer 1986:179.

paradigms in each region.<sup>(2)</sup> A central assumption guiding this review stresses the role played by research agendas in the legitimation of prevailing political agendas. The review of research paradigms is followed by a critical evaluation of underlying assumptions and methods in the two regions. The second section of the chapter posits the framework for an analysis of youth cultural identity as an issue in the study of popular cultures. In this context, special attention is given to the ways popular culture approaches have effected the agenda and methods of communication research.

Most of the comparative reviews assesses the evolution of communication research focus on mass media. These reviews have compared U.S. and British Studies, as well as American and European approaches to mass media research<sup>(3)</sup> and to critical communication research.<sup>(4)</sup> However comprehensive comparisons of research traditions between Latin America and North America have only appeared in the middle of the 1980's.<sup>(5)</sup> Although this review deals with research traditions in the study of popular culture, it refers largely to reviews on mass media and critical communication that have included popular culture as an issue of interest. Although the study of popular culture or "cultura popular" has involved very different disciplines, for the purpose of the present study, this review concentrates on studies within the field of communications that have influenced or have had an impact on the study of popular culture.

## 1.1. NORTH-AMERICAN APPROACHES <sup>(6)</sup>

The purpose of this section is to discuss the various research paradigms that have emerged in North America by reviewing their main conceptual

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<sup>3</sup> See Carey 1979; Hardt 1989, Bennet 1982; currant et al, 1982; Hall 1982.

<sup>4</sup> See Carey 1983; *Jornal of Communication* Summer: 1983; white 1983; Hardt 1989.

<sup>5</sup> The *Journal of Popular Culture* has published two reviews on the research trends in Latin American Popular Culture. The reviews looked at "all aspects of popular culture" which included: pulp press, cinema, TV, sports, popular art and music. The articles, however, lack of theoretical depth and substance. Both reviews remark how little attention Latin American Popular Culture has receive in North Americas studies on Popular Culture. (See Geist 1980; Hinds 1980). A first rigorous attempt to address the ignorance in North America of Latin America research on communication are found in R. Atwood and E. McAnany (Eds.) (1986). This book points out biases effecting research on Latin America (carried out by North Americans). E. McAnany (1986, 1989) offers the most comprehensive attempt to establish and contrast differences between North American and Latin American Communication Research. Articles by Swartz and Jaramillo (1986) and by Simpson (1986) take a comparative method to characterize Latin American critical and alternative research. R. Beltrán (1976) and M. Barbero (1988) analyze the underlying assumptions and methods of US communication research and their influence in Latin American. E. Fox (1988) has edited an evaluative collection of articles on mass media in Latin American.

<sup>6</sup> Although research in Canada and United States presents contrasting differences, the predominant research studies have been exposed to similar influences. I have tried to avoid simplistic generalizations for the whole region, using the term 'North American Approaches' to recall the main research paradigms and influences. In other cases, I will refer specifically to either United States or Canadian studies.

frameworks. The review focuses on communicative research traditions and their views on mass society and popular cultures. It is argued here that functionalism has been the paradigm dominating most of the research on mass culture and popular culture in North America.<sup>(7)</sup> Functionalism has become in almost all fields of Social Sciences a way of thinking that reduces complex social and cultural questions to problems of behavioural change.

### 1.1.1 Pragmatism: <sup>(8)</sup>

American Social Scientist in the early 1900s questioned predominant theories of individualism and socialism. A tradition of critical thinking originated in the sociology of the times, with the writings of John Dewey, and in the pioneer work of the Chicago School, particularly Albion Small, Edward Ross and Robert Park.<sup>(9)</sup> These scholars enhanced the collectivist spirit experienced in American thought before World War I, arguing for a more cultural oriented analysis of social phenomena and a pluralistic view of society (Hardt 1989).

Pragmatic theories criticized dominant "biologist" views of society, introducing a humanistic analysis concerned with problems of integration and adaptation. Focusing on an analysis of the industrialization and urbanization processes, they pointed out the volatility, instability and alienation experienced by members of society at this time (Hardt 1989). Society within this view was seen as a pluralistic entity and the ideas of gradual change, adjustment and continuity were conceived as intrinsic elements of its dynamics. Social scientists identified with the belief of the centrality of the community in the building of a democracy, and the role that communication

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<sup>7</sup> The distinction between two paradigms, dominant and critical has raised confusions and at times false associations such as the equating of "empiricism" with "administrative research" or "positivism." In Latin America, the most common terms used to refer to dominant paradigms are "functionalism", denoting positivist inquiries, and "structuralism" to refer to critical orientations. For the discussion in this section, I will use the term "functionalism" to recall the dominant paradigm in North America. The Latin American definitions of "functionalism" is summarized by Atwood (1986: 17) as, "a way of studying how the media serve and sustain society, particularly the members of their audience, and is charged with being reductionist, positivist, and fundamentally supportive of the status quo."

<sup>8</sup> J. Dewey (1952) defines Pragmatism as "an extension of historical empiricism but with this fundamental difference, that it does not insist upon antecedent phenomena but consequent phenomena; not upon the precedents but upon the possibilities of action." (Dewey, in Hardt 1989).

<sup>9</sup> See J. Dewey "Nature, Communication and Meaning" (*Experience and Nature*, Chicago: Open Court, 1925: 138-170) and "The Development of American Pragmatism" (*Philosophy and Civilization*, New York: Minton, Balch, 1931: 13-35). Some publication that develop this problem by the Chicago school scholars are: E. Ross. "Social Decadence" (*American Journal of Sociology*, 23(5), 1918:620-632); R. Park. *Race and Culture*. (Glencoe Ill: Free Press) and R. Park; E. Burgess and R. McKenzie. *The City* (University of Chicago Press 1967).

plays as a condition for the working of a democracy. Communication was seen as the foundation of society and the base for the formation of culture. Media were seen as agents of persuasion, highly influential and powerful in the shaping of attitudes and ideas (Curran, Gurevith et al., 1982).

The pragmatic view of cooperation and socialization as prerequisites for a successful democracy demonstrates the social sensitivity of this approach. However, pragmatism tended to view communication and cultural processes in an isolated manner, ignoring economic and cultural differences characterizing the processes. In particular issues such as ownership and ideological control of messages were absent in their analysis. Their critique of society and their ideas of the social role of communication remained at an abstract level. Hardt (1989) expresses this as,

“Such an idea of communication describe a process that differentiated between those in control of the technology (the operators of the press) and those receiving the messages (the public), but failed to recognize the effects of cultural or economic differences of the communication process in the working of society. <sup>(10)</sup>”

While the scientific practice of these scholars was sensitive to ideas of democracy and the primacy of community, their analysis was affected by an extreme optimism as to the succes of American democracy and by a view that, in understanding communication solely as a powerful and influential tool, denied the implications of economic and social differences. The result was a reformist discourse that saw cultural and social differences as problems of malfunctioning or lack of adaptation to society. Carey (1983) has noted the failure of pragmatic research to pay attention to power relations (dominance, subordination) and the pervasive influence that their 'cheery optimism' has had on American research throughout the years.

### **1.1.2 The consolidation of a Functionalist Paradigm**

The Chicago School socio-cultural approach to the study of communication declined in the 1940s; years in which a “scientific” approach concerned with order and systematization in the study of communication emerged. Social scientist rediscovered nature and promoted an approach that explained society in terms of a set of structures obeying patterns and dynamics of persuasion (Mathews, 1977; Hall, 1982; Hardt 1989).

Mathew (1977) and Hardt (1989) explain this shift in focus as a consequence of the influence that emerging European sociological theories (Parsons) had at the time in North America. Views on the role that sociologists must play

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<sup>10</sup> H. Hardt. 1989, 567.

in the society under study changed to a non-humanistic view that promoted social detachment as a condition for objectivity in research. Other influential factors in the shift of analysis were related to the economic depression of the 1950's, the increasing importance of the media and the rise of fascism and communism in Europe.<sup>(11)</sup> The instability experienced in North America in the economic and political spheres effected the sociological realm in a reverse sense. Social scientists viewed society as a product of stable structures with functioning social, political and commercial systems. Mass media were the technology that articulated society.

The 1940s and 1950s consolidated a behaviorist view in Social Sciences in the U.S. A period of an obsession with developing rigid models began. Communication and mass communication were defined according to scientific and empirical models based on psychological and learning theories that encouraged an understanding of communication processes as a linear cycle of messages actively sent and passively received. The power of communication processes relied on the persuasive nature of communication practices and on the effects they intended to produce. A "transportation view" dominated the concept of communication as a mere process of transmission of messages with pre-determined intentions (Carey 1979). Problems of communication became question about persuasion, attitude change, behavior modification, conditioning or influence.

In the 1960s, the work of Lazarsfeld consolidated functionalist tendencies in communications research, as it injected an administrative orientation to research. Lazarsfeld's emphasis on the marketing potential of communication research constituted in these years the guiding approach for most American scholars. As Atwood (1986) states, the tradition created was "instrumental" because the boundaries of the field were set in response to the needs of government and industry and to the need of the scientific community to maintain research funding. Hardt (1989) has summarized the conservative approach of this dominant paradigm: a model of mass media effects based on the isolation of independent variables, concerned with the stability of individual values, obsessed with efficiency and the identification of instrumental values with moral values.

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<sup>11</sup> Hall (1980, 1982), Bennett (1982) and Barbero (1988) argue that the concern of American scholars with a behavioral effect was influenced by an empirical European tradition of thought. Among many predominated the political theories of Tocqueville, Stuart Mill, Le Bon and the cultural theories of Ortega y Gasset, Arnold, Elliot, and Nietzsche who first discussed and conceptualized the emergence of the "Mass Society". Theorists of Mass Society assessed the decline of organic community because of the rise of mass society and mass culture. Mass media represented the limits of society's degradation. American scholars were influenced by these European developments but the optimism that surrounded American society at the times and the pragmatic orientation of their research, produced a very different conceptualization of the media and mass society.

A functional view of media responded to the pluralistic optimism of American Social Sciences. Media were the reflection of grassroots cultural traditions and an open forum for diverse societal groups (Guretvitch et al, 1982). Indeed, media were identified with "the popular", the 'unsung heroes of liberal pluralism' and their role was that of 'fourth state'. In Bennett (1982) words,

"The clash and diversity of the viewpoints contained within them contributed to the free and open circulation of ideas thereby enabling them to play the role of a 'fourth state' through which governing elites could be pressurized and reminded of their dependency of majority opinion. Further, in a decisive rejection of the mass culture critique, the media's role as the purveyors of culture was defended as it was pointed out that, in addition to an admittedly slushy pulp culture, they were also responsible for making the established classics of high culture available to a wider audience whose cultural standars had been lifted with rising educational standards.<sup>(12)</sup>"

The identification of "the popular through its relationship with technology characterizes the North American paradigm in these years. The ideological operations carried out by this view deprived "the popular" of the subject it depicts: the people. "The popular" was equated to mass consumption, as its exprssions were defined through mass cultural products. As a consequence, historical and grassroots characteristics of popular cultures had been ignored. This narrow understanding of the 'popular' and its lack of social emphasis continues to permeate American social sciences to date.<sup>(13)</sup>

Bennett (1982) argues that this reductionist view of the popular was a consequence of the orientation taken by the debate on mass communication during these years. The author points out that in Nort America the debate over mass society was conducted by sociologists, while in Europe the debate was more interdisciplinary and conducted by Cultural theorists. North American debate was guided by a concern with hypothesis testing and quantitative findings, and with a social approach that was only interestd in functional questions fo social organization. The discussion about mass society remained at this empirical level and was not asocieted with questions about the cultural direction of mass society. As a consequence, social, cultural and political aspects of media were absent in these approaches (Carey 1979; Hall 1982; Corcoran 1989; Hardt 1989).

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<sup>12</sup> bennet et al., 1982, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Martín Barbero has shown (1987, 1989), that the process of reduction of the 'popular' was initiated in the XIX century when a new conception of the role of the multitudes in society developed. I am referring in this point specifically to the initiation of the last and prevalent view of "the popular".



Hall (1982) contrasts this empiricism of North American approaches with the historical and philosophical orientation of European approaches. The North American emphasis on hypothesis testing and effects measurement, overlooked historical aspects in the study of mass media. As a consequence, processes of communication were seen as linear processes of diffusion (Carey 1979, Curan et al, 1982; Martín-Barbero 1987). Hall (1982) further points out that these absences are explained by the kind of political and ideological presuppositions embedded in American approaches. Martín Barbero complements Hall's idea:

"It necessitated the entire economic force of the new empire, the complete optimism of a country that had defeated fascism and the total faith of its people in Democracy, to make possible the inversion -of capital and meaning- that allowed American theorists to see as the culture of the American people as the culture produced by the mass media: the mass culture."<sup>14</sup>

### 1.1.3. Frankfurt School in North America: Critical Theory

The arrival in North America of two members of the Frankfurt School, Theodoro Adorno and Max Horkheimer, opened the field of Mass Communication and Culture to a new stream of thought characterized by an historical approach to Media studies and a critical view of society. Frankfurt scholars were the first Marxist theorists to bring forth culture as a field of inquiry. They developed the concept of "cultural industry" to underline the capitalist logic of mass reproduction and the inseparability that exists between objects and the production of necessity (Martín-Barbero 1989).

Frankfurt scholars equated popular culture with mass culture which in essence symbolized 'all what is wrong with the capitalist system' and a mechanism for the pacification of the people. In this context 'the people' became associated with the masses, a passive group of consumers incapable of perceiving their alienation (Gruneau 1988; McAnany 1989). This pessimistic view of mass society argued that capitalism has imposed a process of mass production and consumption effecting the most important areas of arts and culture. Frankfurt scholars were concerned with the ideological role of the media industry in a mass society and directly questioned the political values of American society, perpetuated by the media.

Although the Frankfurt scholars brought a crucial challenge to North America with their questions about power relations, their ideas were not immediately accepted. The works of Adorno and Horkheimer were frequently

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<sup>14</sup> J. Martín-Barbero 1987, 43.

ignored by journals and reviews because of the peripheral interest of North America scholars in a critical approach. Critical Theory began to be acknowledged only in the 70's by a stream of North America communication researchers working on a critical approach to communication research and concerned with a sociology of knowledge that integrated questions of power. (Jay 1985 in Hardt 1989).

#### 1.1.4 Critical approaches

Critical approaches to the study of communication have not been completely absent among North America researchers. In fact, there is a tradition of critical research in the region. "Ferment of the field" in the *Journal of Communication* (Summer 1983) marked the first academic publication that devoted an entire issue to the discussion that North American critical scholars were having about the changing paradigms in Communication Research and the necessity of adopting a critical perspective (Hardt 1989). The various articles included in this issue, pointed out the importance of placing the analysis of communication processes in their socio-structural context, that is to say, as structured by relations of power, dominance and subordination (Blumer 1983, Curry-Janssen 1983; Gerbner, 1983). The epilogue article of the journal by Gerbner ("The Importance of being Critical in One's own Fashion") stresses this point:

"The significant dialogue of perspectives is, as it should be, about how to make research most productive in illuminating the dynamics of power of communications and of communications in society. In other words, it is about ways to pursue the critical mission of the discipline."<sup>15</sup>

In the 1960s, critical scholars initiated a questioning of pragmatic and positivistic paradigms dominating the research tradition of United States. They posed questions about the relationship between media influence, cultural institutions and the socio-cultural context in which a specific behavior emerges, and stressed the need of a structural analysis of the social system under which media operate. Media were seen as ideological agencies playing a central role in maintaining class domination and the ideological control of the audience (Bennett 1982; Curran et al., 1982; White, 1983).

Atwood (1986) has also noted the tendency of Critical scholars to equate empiricism and administrative research. Critical scholars were critical of the quantitative tendency that has characterized the positivist research and its methods of data collection, interpretation and use of evidence. The problem, with this criticism, Melody and Manswell (1983) point out, was its underestimation of the contributions that quantitative analysis can provide in backing up political, economic and cultural explanations of social processes.

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<sup>15</sup> G. Gerbner 1983, 356.

According to Carey (1983), C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, Harold Innis, and Kenneth Burke were the first group of scholars to adopt a critical approach to the study of communication processes and mass media in North America. These scholars stressed a view of communication that dealt with questions about American society, its culture and its politics. However, Carey (1983) argues, these questions were considered in terms of communication and mass media. The absence of social and political questions brought forth other disciplines (literary, political and anthropological) accentuated an analytical tendency to study social problems from partial and isolated frameworks.

Critical scholars adapted Neo-Marxist theories to the analysis of mass media role in North American society. While they supported the theoretical propositions of Marxism and its views on social reform, they failed to pay attention to the cultural and political origins of these theories. Consequently, they did not take into account the limitations marxist theories would have when applied to a society where media and cultural industries have a different role (Hardt 1989). Slauko (1987) has also questioned the ethnocentric character of the discussion carried out by these scholars. The concentration on the development of media in Western societies and the theorizations of media roles according to neo-marxist models have missed the fact that a "specific tradition is a product of specific cultural/historical conditions and may produce different consequences when these conditions are changed." In Canada, the critical work of Dallas Smythe in political communication has represented one of this country's most recognized contributions at the international level. In the 1970s, Smythe (1979) was one of the first to aim strong criticisms at American functionalist paradigms, pointing to their "conservative, conformist and escapist (scientific) activity."<sup>16</sup>

In the United States, the critical discourse is now acknowledged. McAnany (1986) maintains that this recognition does not represent a moving away from old behavioral social science paradigms, but it does represent a growing of tolerance to accept different readings and explanations of what is happening in society dynamics.

In the late 1970s, research on "uses and gratifications" was an innovative attempt to overcome the excessive emphasis on effects and the quantitative tendency of the old behavioral paradigm. Findings from research have questioned the idea of an all- powerful media and has shown the media role in reinforcing ideas and values developed on the basis of consensus (Hall

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<sup>16</sup> An important note to add about Critical Scholars in their acknowledgement of other critical approaches to the study of communication, and their recognition of Latin American scholarship. Dallas Smythe and William Melody, are some of the few scholars that have maintained an active exchange of ideas with and have been published in Latin America.

1982). Research on uses and gratifications focused on the conscious and unconscious motivations of audiences in their uses of media. The notion of "selective perception" was central in explaining processes of media consumption and the different individual's interpretations. This change of focus represented an important step towards the construction of a different communication paradigm. A long-standing forgotten side of communication - processes of reception and use-was recovered in this emergent approach. However, the emphasis on media's uses as an individual activity of seeking gratification, isolates processes of reception and underestimates the influence of the social, economic or cultural context. Hall (1982: 61) concludes that the acknowledgement of a selective perception of media messages did not relate back either "to a theory of reading or to a complete map of ideologies". Social perception was functionally understood as the different interpretations individuals make media messages and the satisfactions derived from the reception activity.

### **1.1.5 Cultural Studies in North America**

Studies on popular culture in United States emerged within the field of Mass Communication Research during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and increasingly gained "popularity" in the late 70s and throughout the 1980s. Popular culture studies in the U. S. is not an easy field to delineate however. There is an absence of an identified theoretical leadership because of the difficulties in establishing the conceptual and methodological commonalities of scholars working on issues of popular culture. Undoubtedly, Bowling Green University and its Journal of Popular Culture has gained some leadership in the publications of studies on popular culture, which seems to be generically understood as, "those literary and audio-visual fictional texts which are widely diffused, generally accepted and approved by the majority." (Fluck 1987: 31) The definition, however, lacks of precision, as it avoids the examination of the relational and historical elements by which popular cultural practices are materialized. The Journal has so far represented the predominant research interest in the area of popular culture. The emphasis up to now has been on "celebratory" and ritualized description of almost any expression of "popular art": hobbies, video games, dolls, jokes and so on. The articles, however, tend to have a very narrow focus on the description of the cultural product or text and little attention is given to theory (CRT, 1987:2). In conclusion, it is a research approach affected by a romantic vision that avoids critical and contextual elements of analysis.

Fluck (1988) explains the emergence of popular culture Studies in North America as a reaction to the pessimistic cultural criticism of neo-marxist studies. He argues that popular studies have been developed under a number of "taken-for-granted" associations. Three associations are clearly delineated: 1) a romantic definition of "the people" and "popular art"; 2) a disregard of cultural industries influences on popular cultural forms, and 3) a granting to popular culture of an "authentic" and "democratic" expression.

Another group of North American scholars has approached popular in a more comprehensive manner to study its association with expressive forms and perceptions of audiences. These authors have offered a humanistic approach to the analysis of mass media, engaged the issue of power, and have criticized the dominant quantitative and behaviorist paradigm. J. Carey (1979), T. Gitlin (1982), H. Newcombe (1982) are some of these scholars who are working on a more comprehensive analysis of popular culture as a framework to analyze power and social relations. British cultural studies are an important field of reference in their analysis of media and audiences.

The framework of this group of communicators challenges views of popular culture as "mirror-image" of a nation which has underlined the field of popular cultural studies in North America. They have provided a conceptual framework to analyze popular culture as a process, in which cultural texts are defined as conflictive sites and audiences are seen as negotiating the ideological discourse of media (Fiske 1987; Carey 1988).

In the writings of this group, popular culture appears under various definitions. The term seems charged with ambiguity both in terms of the "institutions" it is associated with, and in the social and political dynamics it is related to. As early as 1973, C. Bigsby aimed to outline some kind of theoretical boundary, identifying popular culture as an area of study within mass communications. His article, "Approaches to Popular Cultures" (1976), however, demonstrated predominant ambiguities. Popular culture tended to folk culture. Popular culture was also equated with attitudes and values of subordinated groups. The fundamental characteristic that nevertheless remains in the various definitions of popular culture, is that of its reproductibility, via its relationship to technology (Shiach 1986). T. Gitlin (1982) approaches the study of popular culture forms from a more historical and dialectical view. Gitlin's analysis integrates the study of the political economy of popular cultures and an examination of the dynamics of cultural knowledge. However, his attempt to define the dynamics and boundaries of the "popular" tends to be affected by the same ambiguity noted above. Gitlin initially defines popular cultures as "forms and occasions of symbolic expression through which creators articulate meanings which are widely valued", but later defines it as "a system" through which the terms of hegemony are negotiated and affirmed. Popular culture is also seen as an institutional convergence of processes that absorb oppositional ideologies, domesticate them, and represent a real site for the expression of resistance (Gitlin 1982).

Questions raised by these scholars about "reader", texts, and their socially perceived meanings broadened the scope of traditional questions about the media. As a result an analysis of the institutional and cultural context in which media operate is introduced. The progression to a different framework emphasizes the importance of media in relation to the societal

context rather than on isolated phenomenas and independent variables that are intrinsic in functionalist research.

Despite the broader framework this approach professes, their studies reproduce a historical treatments embedded in functionalist paradigms. Such a tendency is manifested in the way the “object of study” (i.e. television, rock music, cinema, etc) has been analyzed. The object of study is constituted through an analysis of the factors influencing audiences cultural competences and dynamics of production, but without establishing historical influences shaping the specific role of cultural Industries in North America, and the perception that audiences have of the role of media. Geist's (1984) statement concerning the ahistorical characteristic of the articles in the *Journal of Popular culture* (more than half of its articles were limited to the past 30 years), gives some key for undertanding such a tendency.

“Certainly recent Popular Culture is important. Yet I sense many of us see no need to explore and seek understanding of the antecedents to the modern phenomena. Perhaps we are too involved in the culture around us to look backward. Perhaps too many of us have assumed, erroneously, that the study of popular culture is limited to the modern mass media”<sup>(17)</sup>.

## 1.2. Latin american approaches

Mass media and Popular Culture research have been approached in Latin America as separate fields. However, the study of the material and symbolic elements mediating audience consumption of mass products has provided Latin American scholars with a new research field that integrates and questions both research traditions. This section introduces research trends in Latin America; analyzing their understanding of “the popular” and the role of mass media in Third World societies. It is my central contention in this section, to demonstrate that the continuity of Latin American research tradition is constructed on two main ideas: 1) the democratization of communications and 2) the idea of social change. However, the same research traditions have divergent views on what the “popular” and the process of “massness” mean. As a result there has been different definitions of the role communication in bringing about change and democratization.

### 1.2.1 Development and Modernization

Although the cohesion of an indigenous communication scholarship relates back to the late 60's with the emergence of dependency theories, the late 50's and early 60's are crucial years in shaping a Latin American

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<sup>17</sup>. Geist, 1984, 392.

communication scholarship. In the 1950's, Latin American governments saw "communication" as a strategic field to encourage stability, social and cultural homogenization and the political evolution required for their nation-building (Monsivais 1978; Márquez de Melo 1981).

Media, particularly radio and film, played a crucial role in the formation of such a national identity by consolidating a collective perception that integrated the immense cultural and social diversity of these countries into a unified feeling of nation. In these years, "populist states" (that claim to represent the people) were preoccupied in creating a sense of nation that would solve the complexities that arose in the conditions of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of these countries and that would legitimize the populist state. Media were conceived as the diffusion agents for such a task. Through media, people from small villages, remote areas, and urban dwellers experienced, a similar idea of "nation". Media, by presenting local ceremonies, dances, or traditional practices as common national heritage, mediated people's perception of 'the nation'. The communicative intent of the State was to integrate a local sense of community to a broader sense of political boundaries that the reformist political discourse of the populismo<sup>(18)</sup> actively promoted. Media were seen by the state as an ideal vehicle to create nationhood and to obtain political legitimacy by promoting reformist ideas. Martín-Barbero (1989) characterizes this transforming role of media as,

The role which the mass media truly played in that period rested in their capacity to make themselves the mouthpieces of an interpellation which from the time of populism onwards was converting the masses into a people and the people into a nation; an interpellation that came from the state, but which was only effective to the extent that the masses recognized in it some of their most basic demands and the presence of their modes of expression.<sup>(19)</sup>

However, this political role of media was transformed in the 60s. In these years, communication, and particularly technology, was thought to play a distinct role in the modernization process of Latin American societies (Rogers 1989).<sup>(20)</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> From the 1930s to the 1960s, "populismo" was the predominant political system in the region (President Vargas in Brazil, Cárdenas in Mexico, Perón in Argentina, Rojas in Colombia). Populist states attempted to respond to the lack of representativity of political parties and to the increasing gap -economic but social- between local bourgeoisie and popular classes. The populist state conceived itself as a referee and truly representative of people interests. For an elaboration on this issue see Desco (1981); Márquez de Melo (1981); Martín-Barbero (197).

<sup>19</sup> J. Martín-Barbero, 1989, 455.

<sup>20</sup> The theory of modernization argues for the updating of structures or practices considered "archaic". Viewed schematically, modernization theory functions on the principle of opposing concepts, encompassing the broadest application of the dualist anthropological and sociological

The ideals for modernization were materialized in proposals of economic, social and cultural development. Development was conceived as the promotion of centralized planning and the implementation of a capital-intensive heavy industrialization that would be based on energy-driven imported technologies (Rogers 1989). Modernization, understood as economic growth through capital intensive industries and the improving of standards of living, was seen as the model that would make underdeveloped nations “developed”: urbanized, educated and closer to economic models and life styles of a North (Jacobson 1989; Rathgeber 1989). The 1960s were denominated the ‘development decade’ for the United Nations Agencies (McAnany 1989). In the launching of development programs to the Third World Countries, the idea of development as a “linear path along which all countries travel” was a dominate one (Schwarz and Jaramillo 1986:61).<sup>(21)</sup>

The presence of United States in Latin American countries was then strongly felt. The North feared the development of leftist movements in the region. The North was as well obsessed with influence of communism through the region, which gained ascendancy in the region after the victory of the Cuban revolution. Fears and obsessions were counterbalanced with large Development campaigns (Shwarz and Jaramillo 1986; McAnany 1989a). National governments, international development agencies, the United States program of the “Alliance for Progress” (1963), and the World Bank promoted expensive development programs in the areas of housing, community development, and technology diffusion.

In the Development approach of the 60s, mass media played a unilateral role as a means of communication from governments to people, and form the development programs to their targets. In particular, the role of the media was conceived in terms of the dissemination of technologies, lifestyles and behaviours, and as contributors to the alleviation of the regions socio-economic problems caused by the so-called “underdevelopment” of the region (Jacobson 1989; McAnany 1989). Communication was thought to have a central role in rapidly modernizing attitudes. The framework of North American scholars was adopted and applied to National communication

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traditions of establishing a mechanism of change through cultural diffusion. The application of this theory to the Latin American reality attempted to promote development, the welfare of the community and its homogenization through the introduction of technological innovation and external models of industrialization and control of urbanization.

<sup>21</sup> In 1959 the government of Ecuador, UNESCO and the Central University of Ecuador created CIESPAL [International Centre for Advanced Communication Studies for Latin America] which was the first academic centre in Latin America to provide journalistic and communication degrees at an advanced level. In the 60s, the centre brought U.S. scholars such as Rogers, Berlo and Nixó. The teaching of these development communication scholars and the research carried out by North Americans on the regions constituted the predominant scholar influence during these years (Gomez-Palacio and Jara 1989).



campaigns that were oriented to change attitudes, promote literacy and facilitate urban adaptation. The widespread view was that media would diffuse information from the centre to the periphery, and would promote modern images of success and adaptation. Such diffusion would help to change social attitudes and motivations needed for the economic and technological change. More particularly, the desire for social mobility would come after media exposure (Jacobson 1989).<sup>(22)</sup>

In the “developmentalism” approach, modernization was conceived as cultural diffusion and the imposition of a set of cultural values that rejected traditional ones (Servaes 1989). These assumptions underlined conceptions of “the popular” as backward and resistant to change. From an ethnocentric stance, these views considered that the major obstacles to change were inherently cultural (Díaz Bordenave 1974; Atwood 1986; Beltrán 1976; Servaes 1979). Freire (1970) refers to the “messianic” notion inherent in the 1960s development programs as,

unwell and require “medicine” -whereas in fact their “illness” is the wish to speak up and participate. Each time the people try to express themselves freely and to act, it is a sign that they continue to be ill and thus need more medicine. In this strange interpretation of democracy, health is synonymous with popular silence and inaction.<sup>(23)</sup>

But this economic and social development philosophy was soon questioned by the failure in the 1970s of most the “Alliance for Progress” projects. The promised economic aid was never completely delivered, as the numerous plans and reforms designed to create national planning systems and modify rural, fiscal and administrative structures were never achieved (Agudelo-Villa 1966; Schwarz and Jaramillo 1986). Ironically, attempts at controlling community organization had never been minimally achieved. The strength and autonomy of social movements in those years defied any initiative to control them. At the same time, strong criticisms of the technocratic orientation of the programs, their hidden imperialistic agenda, and their failures to consider the specific socio-economic reality of the region were raised from within the region. Then main promoters of this critical stream were a group of sociologists, demographers and economists best known as Dependency Theorists.

### **1.2.2 Dependency and Cultural Imperialism**

Dependency Theories explained the presence of social inequalities as the product of international economic relations sustaining an imperialistic

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<sup>22</sup> The most influential were Lerner (The passing of Traditional Society, 1985), Rogers (Diffusion of Innovations, 1962) and Pye (Communication and Political Development, 1963).

<sup>23</sup> Freire, 1970.

power, socio-economic dependency, and unequal economic distribution.<sup>(24)</sup> Latin American countries suffered from the dependent nature of their economics, and social systems, manifested in problems such as the lack of control of internal urbanization processes, the inadequacy of housing services, and the scarcity of collective services. Dependency theories criticized the Developmentalist view of Latin American countries as living in an underdeveloped stage of capitalism. Underdevelopment was rather seen as the result of external imperialistic forces, that had an "internal expression" in the social practices of local classes which enforced foreign values and interests (Schwarz & Jaramillo 1986; Canclini 1989).

At the level of communication. Dependency Theories emphasized links between national TV and radio broadcasting systems with the Transnational American Corporation (TNCs). Communication was viewed as a central element in the American economic and political agenda, and as a strategic means to enhance cultural imperialistic ideology. U.S. Imperialism was conceived as a new economic and cultural colonialism. Communication scholars engaged in research projects that aimed to demonstrate the character of such "penetration": origins of international investments, enterprise ownership and hidden ideological agendas.

The theme of cultural imperialism has been recurrent in Latin American communication research since the early 1970s. Among other scholars, the work of Mattelart in Chile during the socialist government of Salvador Allende. Pasquali in Venezuela and Veron in Argentina represented the theoretical and pragmatic approach of the time.<sup>(25)</sup>

According to Cultural imperialism theories, mass media were commodities that have become fetishes in modern societies (Mattelart, 1975). Media were

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<sup>24</sup> The first outline of a Dependency theory is founded in the writings of Paul Baran *The Political Economy of Growth* and Andre Gunder Frank *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*. A basic stance of their theories was that underdevelopment was the opposite consequence of development and that the relations characterizing world systems were that of 'metropolises-satellites'. In Latin America the works of A. Quijano "Redefinición de la Dependencia y proceso de Marginalización en América Latina", the ECLA group and E. Laclau (1971) applied these principles to stress that the entire history of Latin America since the conquest had been of a dependent process. See Morse (1971).

<sup>25</sup> See A. Pasquali *Comunicación y Cultura de Masas* (Pasquali 1976) which is concerned with the influence of mass media in the "massification" of society and the extermination of social communication and cultures. The work of E. Veron *Conducta, Estructura y Comunicación* (1963) analyzes the latent meaning and ideological operation of communication messages and the ideological function of mass media in shaping peoples' consciousness. Works of A. Mattelart *Agresión desde el espacio* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1975) and Dorfman and Mattelart *To read Donald's Duck* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1987) analyze, from a marxist framework, the fetish character of communication media, and the North American cultural imperialism by means of TV programs, comics and books. A review in English on these authors is found in Schwarz and Jaramillo (1986).

viewed as potential tools of ideological manipulation, having a hidden but persuasive power in influencing audiences. The imperialistic transnational character of United States corporations in the Latin American scene represented then a dominant theme of a research direction (Schwarz and Jaramillo 1986; McAnnay 1986, 1989b). This research focused on revealing mechanisms of ideological domination, and on the study of cultural industries and products such as advertising, cartoons and marketing (Dorfman and Mattelart 1972). At a more practical level the diffusion of research results was a useful means to demystify mass media ideological tools.

Dependency theories have a critical value within Latin American research tradition. Dependency scholars were the first group promoting an indigenous perspective that openly rejected North American modernization and functionalist perspectives. However, their view of economic and cultural imperialism as phenomenon penetrating all levels of society reduced any popular manifestation to a dependent act. From a Dependency point of view, the cultural expression of the popular classes was an alienated expression. A "Frankfurt school" view of the "people" as "cultural-dopes" dominated their analysis, as it attempted to raise the consciousness of the people. The approach failed to recognize the weight of cultural differences in shaping social, economic and communication relation. An excessive emphasis of adaptation and resistance by which Latin American popular classes experience and perceive their position in society. As García- Canclini affirms.

In the 60s and until the mid 70s, analysis of culture consisted of describing strategies of domination. Whether the issue was to study Marxism, or to renovate it with structuralism and later with semiotics, the objectives were not scientific but focus on uncovering the machinations of power and its manipulations of consciousness as a manner in which to explain why "the masses" did not behave with the revolutionary energy that corresponded to their historical interests. <sup>(26)</sup>

Within the Developmentalist view, the term "people" preserved the negative connotation inherent in modernization approaches which associated the traditional with resistance to change; by aligning the term "people" to the language of Dependency: passivity and alienation. "The popular" evoked a revolutionary essence defining any social actor, practice or process which demonstrated political awareness. "Cultura popular" became a revolutionary ideal, an abstract reality, that would be materialized through an educative process of consciousness raising and the establishment of a *new society*. As Subercasaux (1968) states, the cultural imperialist definition of "the popular" conveyed a reductionist and "political lecture of the popular" that stressed "the

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<sup>26</sup> N. García-Canclini 1987, 2.

popular” as an abstract ideal but denied it as a daily cultural expression of the people.

For García-Canclini (1988), Dependency views of culture were restricted to narrow descriptions of strategies of domination. Most Dependency research unveiled power strategies and manipulations of people’s consciousness, but an extreme concentration on dominant strategies disregarded the way people perceive messages and the audiences’ use of dominant messages. It was assumed that people as consumers would accept passively the dominant proposals and become obedient executors of the induced practices. This view of communication processes implied a view of communication as an all-powerful producer of effects.<sup>27</sup> García-Canclini further includes a criticism of a “theological” idea of power that did not acknowledge the existence of any autonomy in popular cultures. A “deductivist” methodology was embedded in a onesided, fatalistic perspective which viewed any social problem as a direct consequence of outside forces (Martínez 1983; Simpson 1986; McAnany 1986, Martín Barbero 1987)

### **1.2.3 Alternativa Communication**

The emergence of an identifiable Latin American body of communication thought and the development of original communication experiences (Comunicación Popular) are some of the expressions of the very active period of the 1970s. Marxist and Neo-marxist theories influenced the work of a large number of scholars and practitioners in the region. The period was characterized by a growing socio-political awareness among most scholars and a concern with making social science research a contribution to social praxis.

Alternative communication scholars agreed with cultural imperialist approaches in terms of the premise of Latin American dependency from transnational economic and cultural systems, but they criticized the excessive emphasis of the Cultural Imperialist approach on the power of external forces. The Cultural imperialist understanding of external domination as unilaterally imposed in one nation, could not adequately explain international power relations. The development of industrial, technological, financial and cultural systems was rather the result of a complex transnational net of economic and ideological structures. The economic and ideological dependency of Latin American countries was manifested in the transnational structure of mass media and in the ideological rol assumed by the media. In order to counteract such views, an indigenous communication theory and practice based on liberation, not liberalism, and participation of all sectors of society, needed to be developed.

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<sup>27</sup>. The same view of communication that has influenced functionalist and critical theory approaches.

New methods of communication research were conceived upon the premise of a commitment between theory and the practice of liberation. Both the theoretical production and the communicative experiences carried out under these premises were characterized as alternative communication processes.

Two main concerns were presented in the research agenda of alternative communication scholars: the democratization of communication structures for the establishment of a new international order of information and communication; and second, the experimentation with new democratic means for popular communication that would assist popular classes in their social struggles and liberation from economic and class oppression.

### **a. Democratization of communication**

As a point of departure, Latin American scholars analyzed the effect of transnational corporations on Latin American communication systems, particularly the unfairness of national and international information and communication orders (McAnany 1986; Simpson 1986). Communication processes were suffering the consequences of political coercion, capitalist economic interests and cultural industries monopoly. Changes in the international information and communication order had to be introduced to guarantee democratic, horizontal communication and information exchange.

With support of Unesco (1976),<sup>(28)</sup> communication scholars lobbied for the creation of national communication policies, for the promotion of local news agencies and the pooling of resources among news agencies of non-aligned countries (Beltrán 1976a; Fox de Cardona, 1976; Muñizaga and Rivera 1983; Canclín, 1988). The views expressed in the McBride report, regarding access, exchange of information, change of perspective and reciprocity were accepted and implemented through actions such as the creation of the "Agencia Latinoamericana de Servicios Informativos" (ALASEI) [Latin American Feature News Services] and the Intergovernmental Information Service (ASIN). Latin Americans, however, emphasized that the democratization of information would not succeed without a democratization of societies. In this sense, the democratization views contained in the McBride report would never be reached if systems of political repression, censorship, and coercion of expression were prevalent. Latin American argued that in order to achieve the desired levels of Democratization,

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<sup>28</sup> In 1970, the SVI General Conference of UNESCO decided to involve the institution in the formulation of national policies of mass media. In July 1976, representatives of twenty Latin American and Caribbean governments met to discuss issues of National Communication Policies and to identify problems in its national media systems. For an overview of media policies in Latin America see the collection of essays edited by E. Fox (1988).

communication activities would have to be implemented within those spheres of society where the control of information vests with the people and their organizations. They emphasized that information and communication were not separate from the global social context and that their democratization was part of the struggle against hegemonic classes (Roncagliolo 1982; Kaplún 1983).

Parallel to the concerns for a new international information and communication order and the establishing of national policies, these scholars criticized Developmentalist assumptions of the political and economic neutrality implied in technology transfers to the third World. They were concerned with the ideological implications (economic, but mainly social) of this transfer. Research in this area measured the impact of these technologies. Research was also carried out on the ideological content of news, the US presence in Latin American advertising, flows of TV programs and the mechanisms of manipulation involved in informative systems (Simpson 1986; Schwartz and Jaramillo 1986).

Since the 1970s, "transnationalization" has been the central concept applied by alternative communication scholars in describing the actual phase of capitalist economy. Capitalism, in order to promote a transnationalization of the economy, has regarded culture as strategic field. In particular, communication technologies are seen as the system facilitating cultural expansion. Communication technologies, furthermore, represent the main transnationalization agents of a political model in which the boundaries of the 'national' and the state are becoming increasingly blurred (Roncagliolo 1985; García-Canclini 1988, Martín-Barbero 1988).

The analysis of the transnational character of economic, cultural and communication systems is undoubtedly a contribution. The concept of transnationalization has not only helped to understand the economic and political role of local/national elites --that is, how benefits and decisions of the transnational systems concentrate on the metropolitan elites- but also the complexities of international power relations.

The view of Hegemony that has emerged from this approach stresses relations of 'transaction' among hegemonic and subordinated groups. Hegemony, in this view, is not the direct imposition of a culture, but rather the resemantization of peoples knowledge in order to subordinate it to a transnational system. The interest of commercial and government media to promote the broadcasting of 'indigenous' or 'peasant' iconography, music or popular religious practices are rooted in this view; a path towards homogenization that denies the cultural pluralism of Latin American societies.

## **b. Popular communication**

This second concern of Latin American communication research looks at democratic alternatives of communication for lower-status groups. Popular communication research originated outside of social scientific scholarship, and was developed by social activists and intellectuals involved in processes of “popular education” and communication for social change. Consequently, research objectives and themes were defined according to the evolution of the political and practical needs of educative and communicative experiences, rather than according to academic work. The framework adopted by researchers and practitioners relied on the educational ideas of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich on “education for liberation”. The methodological framework of communicators such as Mario Kaplún (1983), Alfredo Paiva (1983), Javier Esteinou (1981), was applied to experiences of “comunicación popular” which encouraged the non-professional use, ownership and control of media for the benefit of powerless groups (White 1987).<sup>(29)</sup> It viewed the research result as knowledge that would feed social practice and contribute to social change was fundamental to these approaches. The researcher was a facilitator in people’s learning processes and a committed intellectual who encouraged people’s understanding of their material and social reality, and educational and communicative alternatives.

Popular communication practitioners and scholars argued that communication processes based on an educational approach lead to alternative communication systems. Alternative communication was defined within this framework as,

“Alternative communication is part of a socio-political praxis of social transformation; consequently (...), these forms of communication are predetermined from outside the communicative field. They are found within the framework of a political project that produces them as instrument and expression of its development.”<sup>(30)</sup>

Some common characteristics defining this communicative approach are:

- a) Popular communication processes are democratic and participatory processes committed to social organization and mobilization. The goal is

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<sup>29</sup> Attempts at reviewing the underlying assumptions as well as the strengths and limitations of practical experiences in “Comunicación Popular” have been generally limited to individual countries. See for example Peirano (1985) in the case of Peru, and Rodriguez (1988) for the Colombian case. The magazin CHASQUE, edited in Ecuador by ciespal, has steadily published experiences and research findings from the region. A more holistic attempt to characterize “comunicación popular” in the region is founded in White (1987, a, b).

<sup>30</sup> M. Mata, 1983, 34.

to promote processes of consciousness raising and the people's active involvement in their social and economic liberation.

- b) Popular communication approaches questioned the power position of the sender in traditional communication models -as the one controlling the technological expertise and the message to be transmitted. The alternative model consisted of an horizontal process of shared-messages, circularity of communication, and feed-back. Horizontal communication was achieved by the interactive use of media and by involving the people in the production of their own communicative messages. The use of small format media (bulletins, newspapers, cardboard, slides, loudspeakers) and educational radio at the local level (barrios populares, rural areas and unions) represented the communicative alternatives to traditional educative processes and one-way media (Reyes Matta 1981; Paiva 1983; Peirano 1985).
- c) Communication practices were characterized as "oppositional" to the dominant communication system, playing roles of "counter-information" "non-formal education" "conscious-raising" "contributors to mobilization" and "empowerment".

The most common themes of research covered topics such as popular press or workers newspapers, small-format media, indigenous or peasant radio stations, alternative experiences in technology use, indigenous knowledge and traditional communication systems. Peirano (1985) and Martínez (1983) note the difficulties in implementing appropriate research methods and in communicating research results of these experiences. Alternative communication research was challenged, in its assumptions and methods, by its rejection to apply "positivist" research methods, and by the lack of minimal methodological guidelines of the marxist framework adopted. A large amount a bibliography was nevertheless produced and published in political or union magazines. It emphasized the political potential of particular forms of expression and their capabilities to reinforce a culture of resistance.

Popular culture was not a current theme of this research but was rather seen as a political objective -to be constructed through political labour (Shiach 1986). Sunkel (1984) argues that this view reduce "the popular" and replaced the popular language for a language about "the popular". consequently with this view of "the popular", alternative communicative expressions (programs, plays, bulletins, music) represented society as contradictory locus -of class struggles- and "the popular" as the political "vanguard" (proletarians and peasants) (Sunkel 1984; shiach 1986). The "popular" was confined to a few actors and to a few spaces (e. g. the union, the strike, the manifestation). Everyday cultural expressions with no explicit "political" direction were excluded from the discourse about the "popular".



These expressions were integrated in a discourse about alienation and consciousness raising.

With the consolidation of a regional theoretical and political position in matters of communication and cultural policies, dynamic and progressive schools of thought gained leadership. Their advocacy for the formulation of national communication policies that integrated a social view and a progressive vision was no doubt a valuable step towards the democratization of communications in the region (Reyes Matta 1981; 1986). Although alternative communication approaches have seen the present organization of cultural industries and the structure of the mass media as projects opposed to alternative communication, they have also perceived media as occasional allies in the struggles of subordinate groups and spaces that could eventually recover for the benefit of the majority. Research on this theme is not very prolific, because the issue is seen more as a point in a political agenda rather than as a research topic.

During the 1960s and 1970s alternative communication was the predominant approach among communication practitioners and researchers. Marques de Melo has stressed the value of the practical connection of its research methods and the research potential of the conceptual apparatus. However, the author argues, that the "politicization of communication research" has created a reluctance among North American and European researchers in adopting its guiding assumptions. De Melo's point is debated by McAnany and Atwood (1986) who argue that the practical and committed orientation of Latin American communication research is what represents one of its more important lessons for North American scholars.

#### **1.2.4 Crisis of Representation and Culture**

The late 70s and beginning of the 80s were, in Latin America, years of a total reassessment of the paradigms and guiding ideas conducting academic research and political praxis. The impact of political repression and the horrors of dictatorship suffered by many countries, the failures of most of the democratic and alternative proposals in providing concrete solutions to the deterioration of the living conditions of the middle and poor classes, the economic crisis and break-down of national economies, the inability of governments, parties and organized groups to acknowledge and give response to the emergence of new social movements, all diagnosed the exhaustion of discourses (political and scientific) about "the popular". A crisis of models, in particular models of economic, social and political alternatives was felt in the region. García Canclín (1988) has clearly demonstrated how the crisis affected both rightist and leftist political discourses, and their cultural and political agendas.

Among them, stand out the breakup of: a) conceptions of cultural policy promoted by aristocratic oligarchies (the biologicis-teluric conception) that promoted folklore and conceived the popular as collection of natural essences (e. g. the race); b) statist conceptions promoted by populism in which the popular is embodied in the state structure; c) conceptions of "nacionalismo acuartelado" [nationalism defined by a military mentality] derive from the "doctrine of national security" and, last, of conceptions of the popular contained in the more global strategy of market unification.<sup>(31)</sup>

Political and theoretical discourses associated the "popular" to an homogeneous essence absent of conflict. The 'popular' was defined either as museum object, or as revolutionary essence. The crisis of the late 1970s revealed the exhaustion of these discourse. The weight of Latin American economic and political changes could not be explained by these linear views. Particularly, these views were challenged by the rise of a variety of new social movements which actors were women's, youth expressing social and generational protest, homosexuals, the basic christian communities, urban dwellers and progressive journalist which, recreating ways of struggle and spaces of political action, opened a new arena of political action which is largely cultural and is rooted in everyday concerns and experiences of oppression (Biernatzki and White 1987:2).<sup>(32)</sup>

In the communication field, the crisis of theoretical models revealed the incapability of research paradigms to give account of the dynamics of reception, and the communicative practices of the popular clases. The widespread development of alternative media, popular radio, video, popular theatre for community mobilization was demonstrating the independent capacity of popular classes for cultural creativity and resistance to transnational culture. However, questions are still being raised by scholars and practitioners as to the basic assumptions and practical guidelines applied in the framework of alternative communication. In a total reexamination of taken--for-granted truths about the popular, "cultura popular" emerged as a theoretical and political place to conduct this questioning. The challenge for "cultura popular" studies, is to: 1) explore new theoretical, methodological, and political alternatives that give account of the complexity and diversity of Latin America social formations, and 2) to explain the ways in which Latin

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<sup>31</sup>. G. Sunkel, 1984, 15.

<sup>32</sup>. The theme of new Social Movements has become of central importance in Latin American Social Sciences, as well as, in the educative and political practice. Attempts to conceptualize these new movements have stressed: 1) the socio-cultural root energizing these movements -instead of a political one; 2) their political independence -from both left and right-; and 3) the socio-cultural diversity of their membership and alliances. See T. Evers and C. Muller-Plantenberg. *Movimientos barriales y estado: Luchas en la esfera de la reproducción en America Latina* (Bogotá, Cinep, 1983) and T. Evers, "Identidad: la faz oculta de los nuevos movimientos sociales en America Latina" (*Procesos y Políticas Sociales*, 24, 1986: 7-24).

American popular classes experience their relations with the social and political context, particularly their experiences of consumption. The third section of this chapter will attempt to more fully develop the central points of this approach.

### **1.3. NORTH AMERICAN AND LATIN AMERICAN RESEARCH TRADITIONS: What is the Difference?**

The large differences between the historical and political research tradition in Latin American, and the pragmatic and "optimistic" research perspective of North America are clear at this point. E. McAnany's (1989) comparison of the research traditions in the study of television in the two regions, has provided an excellent and pioneer analysis of the reasons and factors which explain why North American and Latin American discourses differ so radically.

Latin American research traditions since the 1960s have been very critical of the organization of cultural industries and especially of the mass media. The U. S. research tradition, on the other hand, has been highly influenced by the optimism of liberal pluralism thought and the view of media as mirror-images of the Nation. Additionally, U.S. research has been constrained by defining the research subject according to its market potential rather than its epistemological relevance. The orientation of Latin American research has been appropriately understood by Halloran (1981) as a critique of the lack of relevance in research topics characteristic of U.S. communication research, but also as a critique of the basic assumptions of a dominant functionalist model. H. Newcombe has recalled an American phrasing of this contrast; "the American tradition has been one of faith while that of Latin American one of suspicion" (Newcombe in McAnany 1989:12).

This chapter has highlighted the influence that historical, economic and regional factors play in defining the role of mass media in society. It has been argued that the shaping of two contrasting discourses about "the popular", is effected by two factors: First, by the way in which cultural industries, and in specific media, have operated in each society, and second, by the perception that the members of each society have had about the role of media.

Two other points have been highlighted by this review. The first point concerns the contributions of Latin American research in analyzing international and national communication orders, cultural industries and local cultures in a historical and socio-political context. Such historical framework is missed in North America communication research, contemporary research on popular culture included. A difference that will become evident in the discourses about "the popular": in Latin America, "the

popular” is perceived as a historical matrix, while in North America “the popular” is associated with widespread consumption and mass media.

Latin American analysis is socio-historical and looks at audiences from that view. The cultural competence<sup>(33)</sup> of audiences to critically look at media discourses is seen as determined by the broader socio-cultural, economical and political history of the country of the region. Such analysis in U.S. tends to be based on the context of individuals.

The second point highlighted in this review involves differences in analyzing macro processes (e.g. the media), in particular, the different focus of study. The Latin American focus on inequalities of power, economics and recently on cultural contrast with the U.S. which tend to focus more narrowly on the media and their central role as articulators of society. While the discourse of Latin Americans has developed as a response to the transnational threat on their national cultures and economies, U.S. discourse has responded to an urgency in legitimating its political and economical position in the transnational system. In conclusion, while the attempt to link goals of the research to a concern for social change reveals the practical element guiding Latin American research, it also reveals one of the central issues missing in North America dominant research traditions.

Looking at the roots of these contrasting discourses McAnany (1989) argues the appropriateness of cultural explanations.

It is, however not enough to say in a more anthropological sense that the two cultures simply “see” television in a different cultural prism --although there is certain intuitive rightness in the observation. Rather one could argue that there is a base in everyday life experience that finds television’s meaning quite different in the two cultures.<sup>(34)</sup>

Besides cultural explanations, McAnany notices the different intellectual traditions that have influenced research in each regions. That is, that Marxism in Latin American effected the mainstream of communication research during the 1970s and 1980s. In the U.S., Functionalism has permeated the different research traditions. Lastly, there are the economic and political factors of the evolution and role of cultural industries in each region and the ways in which research traditions have chosen to become critical of such roles or to accept them by developing explanatory and functional frameworks.

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<sup>33</sup> Cultural Competences: the critical understanding of media text and of the conventions by which texts are construed.

<sup>34</sup> McAnany 1984, 14.

## 1.4. POPULAR CULTURE: A Framework for Analysis

Popular culture represents in Latin America a framework for the analysis of the historical peculiarities and socio-cultural plurality of these societies. Socio-economic transformations at the beginning of the century and processes of constructing national identities did not result in the total destruction of popular cultures. Despite the subordination popular classes experienced, a popular history evolved out of this succession of continuous expropriations and dominations. Popular history evolves as a positive underground and silent process, re-creating people's ways of life, and symbolizing peoples' own modes of expression and struggle (Vargas and Riaño 1984). In this framework, "the popular", is defined by its historical and social origin as a peoples' grassroots culture and "the people" as the majority of the population which is excluded from economic, political and social benefits of a society.

### **Mestizaje and Conflict.**

Latin American scholars have criticized the reductionist approach of essentialist, romantic and exclusivist views of popular culture, insisting that "the popular" should be approached as a heterogeneous, dynamic and conflictive cultural matrix. In the case of Latin America, this cultural matrix is grounded in a history of colonization in which, despite the destruction of political and social structures of indigenous populations, indigenous knowledge and cultural forms could not be completely exterminated (Monsivais 1978; García-Canclini 1985; Martín-Barbero 1987). The peculiarities of colonial history in the region have accentuated ethnic and cultural fusions. "Mestizaje" represents the defining element of this popular cultural expression but also the key device for social, economic and symbolic interaction of Latin America societies (Martín-Barbero 1988).<sup>(35)</sup> This fusion, however, has not dissolved indigenous and local cultures into a unified "mestizo" culture. "Mestizaje" in the Latin American context represents not just cultural blending, but the creation of a new identity, "the mestizo identity", that is continuously and sectorially recreated with new fusions (the rural and the urban, the massive and the popular, the ethnic and the new social actors).

"In this way, a new map is traced: the survival of ethnic groups as an integral part of capitalistic structures but producing at the same time and in their turn a cultural truth which is not consumed in these structures."<sup>(36)</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Over the time "mestizo" has come to signify the 'mixed' population, product of many generations of inter-marriage (indigenous, spanish, black). "Mestizaje" recalls the process of cultural fusions that characterizes any Latin American cultural expression.

<sup>36</sup> Jesús, Martín 1989: 21.

Plurality and “impurity” are other elements that Latin Americans scholars have applied in approaching the curious mixture of cultural backgrounds (indigenous, rural, black, spanish and so on) and systems of values contained in, for example, the cultural practices of poor urban dwellers. The various cultural practices of street youth of the barrios populares of Bogota that are described in this thesis illustrate the dynamic of such mestizaje.

If “mestizaje” represents the essence of Popular cultural composition, it is subordination which defines popular classes position with respect to the dominant system. García-Canclín’s definition of popular cultures by a theory of social reproduction develops this idea. The maintenance of Popular cultures in the capitalist system is seen by García-Canclini as a consequence of:

- a) the unequal appropriation of economic and cultural goods on the part of different classes, ethnic and social groups in production and consumption;
- b) the characteristic elaboration of their conditions of life and the specific satisfaction of their needs;
- c) the conflictual interaction of the popular and hegemonic classes for the appropriation of goods and the exchanges that counterbalance conflicts and renew interactions (García-Canclini 1988: 484).

In conclusion, the presence of popular cultures in the capitalist system is explained by the functional and adaptive nature of popular cultural practices, and, by the maintenance of popular social context that function outside dominant “logic”. Neighborhood survival networks in the barrios populares of Latin America are an example of the dynamic and adaptive character of Popular Cultures. Neighborly relations have preserved rural values and traditions of solidarity, reciprocity, moral obligations, for example systems of “fiado” [system of interest-free credit bases on trust and bargaining] but adapting them to the urban ambience. The barrio popular, as social and cultural space, has become the basic regulating context for all such trust relations, constituting a multitude of small favours related to daily cash, food and security that make up these mutual-help networks. Informal social relations exhibit a multifunctional character which satisfies the people’s reproductive and survival needs. These relations promote integration into the system by their contribution to the reproduction of the work force, but also comprise horizontal relations of solidarity, providing an area in which cultural re-elaborations are possible (Vargas and Riaño, 1984; Vargas 1985).<sup>(37)</sup>

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37. Research on the symbolic and economic strategies of survival of the urban poor in Latin American is a theme of great interest in cultural studies in Latin America. Analysis of domestic cycles and processes stresses on the ways people adapt to economic changes and in the use

But the cultural re-elaborations exist under conflict. Social transformations of productive and power relations deactivate and appropriate popular cultural practices, traditions, and ways of life. The dominant "logic" of appropriating popular expressions and deactivating traditional systems define the conflictive context in which "the popular" is expressed. but appropriation is not only an element characterizing the process of deactivating the popular. The cultural dynamic of subordinated groups is shaped in an active process of appropriations and reappropriations of dominant proposals. The re-appropriating of symbols and practices are all redefinitions taking place within a dialectical process of struggle, seduction, containment and resistance.

The structuring principle of "the popular" relies on this dynamic of tensions and propositions. As Carlos Monsivais (1984) states, the popular is "that which can not avoid being just that, what is constituted by exclusion and under oppression (...)". S. Hall's (1981) discussion on "the popular" emphasizes these dialectical tensions and opposing relations as defining principles of popular cultures; a dynamic of oppositions structures the domain of culture into the 'popular' and the 'non-popular'.

### **Static Societies?**

One of the underlying assumptions of dominant approaches to the "popular" is its referring to "popular" as resistance to change. Tradition, in these views, is opposed to modernity, and associated with static societies. Although popular cultures recall traditional forms of life, they can not be associated with unchanging or static cultures. They are neither passive nor mere anachronisms because the popular relates to continuous change. Research on the transforming nature of the popular practices, for example of the indian's handicrafts or the rural fiesta, has shown the potential of traditional systems and cultures to adapt to the market economy, recycling traditional costumes, practices or rites into transformed practices.<sup>(38)</sup> In the present, these transformations are closely related to the interaction of the traditional with the mass society (García-Canclini 1987; Martín Barbero 1989). Mass media are at the centre of this re-organization, representing critical spaces for the expression of popular narratives (undoubtedly the best example being the Latin American soap opera) and as sources for cultural borrowing, appropriation and identification.

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of domestic units as sources of economic and social strategies. Studies of domestic units demonstrate the relevance that "traditional" popular context have for peoples' modes of integration to society, and as positive mechanism of reaction. See L. Lomnitz (1978); Vargas (1985); Stavenhagen (1970).

<sup>38</sup> See N. García-Canclini (1985) study on the transformations of themes and figures of Mexican indian's "artesanias" for their selling in the touristic market and J. González (1980) study on the "fiestas" in Mexico.

If the forms of provided commercial popular culture are not purely manipulative, then it is because, alongside the false appeals, the foreshortenings, the trivialization and shortcircuits, there are also elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a recreation of recognizable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding.<sup>(39)</sup>

*"Cultura popular"* approaches have debated views of mass society as equated to mass media. Further, these approaches question the view of the process of massification of culture as movement totally external to "the popular". The defining character of mass society, Martín-Barbero says, cannot be a collection of objects or contents, but the cultural model it conveys, and therefore, the set of behaviours and principles of perception that it involves. Mass media have become an integral part of popular culture and "the popular" can no longer be seen outside mass society. The forms that "the popular" can no longer be seen outside mass society. The forms that "the popular" is taking in mass society, particularly in urban Latin America, involves the ways in which media materials become compelling models for thought and action in everyday life. The "popular" today shows the direction acquired by international processes of communication, satellites and technologies included, but it also shows the direction of local processes, the heterogenous and rich manifestation of popular protest (Martín-Barbero 1989).

The shaping of popular identities takes place in this interaction of forces. The study of processes of cultural identification carried out in this thesis supports this guiding view. Youth cultural expression is particularly constructed in a dynamic of "consumption" and cultural borrowing of mass cultural products. The active experience of youth consumption operates in the terrain of appropriations and borrowing. Concretely, this process involves a translation of products-commodities, action-practices and symbols of the group's style and the transformation of products and symbols into new meaningful ones (Clarke 1977, Hedbidge 1979).

The difficulties of defining "the popular" and the various reductionist definitions to which "the popular" has been subjected are at the centre of discussions among Latin American scholars. García-Canclín, analyzing the various scientific and political definitions of "the popular" prevalent in Latin America, points out their tendency to reduce "the popular" to either "folkloric" objects or "mass" products. "The popular" cannot be defined by the description of common internal features, or as set of traditional contents; rather, and applying Gramscian views of the cultural dynamic in capitalist systems, "the popular" is a relational category rather than an essence,

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<sup>39</sup> S. Hall. 1981, 233.



“The popular” can not be defined by its origin or its traditions, but by its position of being constructed in front of the hegemonic.<sup>(40)</sup>

#### 1.4.1 The crisis of Representation: The view of the “other”

The above mentioned understanding of “the popular” has effected a complete re-orientation of research paradigms and political strategies towards a representation of a reality from the perspective of its actors. This research approach has stressed further explorations in terms of the relation between method and situation. The point here is that crossing theoretical discourses reveals the disconnection between theory and experience and the inability of current research methodologies to capture the point of view of the “other”. This gap was perceived in Latin American as a crisis of representation affecting the discourse of Social Sciences and where the change has to be operated: from the “intellectual” logic to the context of the social actor life (Laclau, 1971; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Latin American scholars on popular culture have undergone a total reexamination of orientations and methods guiding social reality analysis. Special interest has been placed in the understanding of the new social social movements, and particularly those social actors that traditional leftist and conservative discourses have ignored or repressed. It is in this context, that the interest in popular youth as new social actors and as a dynamic social movement has emerged.

The re-orientation of research paradigms implies, as well, a methodological displacement. Latin Americans aim to develop a methodological strategy that gives account and facilitates the understanding of the view point of “the other”. And it is here, when re-discovering anthropological reasons (understanding “the other”), that Latin American Social Sciences appeals for an ethnographic perspective as a way to explore cultural realities, silent logics and conflictive cultural manifestations.

The interest in ethnography is also guided by an attempt to resolve the distance separating research discourse and the logic and reality of people.<sup>(41)</sup> The researchers task, under this view, is to provide representations rather than supposed “objective” descriptions. Representation as an ethnographic task is understanding peoples’ cultural experiences, and representing the

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<sup>40</sup> N. García-Cañclini, 1987, 9.

<sup>41</sup> “People” is however an equally conflictive and ambiguous term. As Morach Schiah (1986) shows the various meanings attached to the concept (as the total population of a country, as the excluded majority, as the mob) illustrate changing views of the popular scene before the Enlightenment. In Latin America, the term has been appropriated in the same conflictive manner. Although appropriated by populist, dictators, leftist and rightist, the term has been mainly associated to those social actors that are excluded from the social, economic and political benefits.

culture from the peoples' perspective. The voice returns to the protagonist, making them commentators of the experiences they are undergoing. The ethnographic account "reads" (as recognition of narrative discourses) cultural criticisms circulating among the people about their everyday life experiences (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Because these cultural criticisms do not have an explicit expression in popular cultures, ethnography could search for keys which reveal the social levels and contexts in which reactions and resistances are generated. This issue is of crucial importance for the Latin American cultura popular approaches because of its commitment to finding alternative views of social reality. The objective guiding this proposal is clear: the active engagement of both research and theoretical production in the search for alternatives that acknowledge the dynamism and potential of popular cultural expressions. My roles as a researcher in the fieldwork and in the writing of this thesis is placed within this framework.

#### **1.4.2 The communicative view: study of mediations**

At the level of communication, cultura popular scholars have raised profound questions as to the ways in which functionalist, dependent, and cultural imperialism paradigms have approached: 1) the conception of mass culture and the interrelation between popular cultures and mass society; 2) the study of processes of reception and of the mediated nature of consumption processes.

The ideas of the social perception of messages and the activity of reception as a mediated activity raised the interest of communication scholars in the study of popular cultures as a way to understand the material and symbolic elements mediating processes of communication:

The starting point for research should not be the disjunction of media as hegemonic control and passive reception, but the mediations, the points of articulation between the processes of media production on the one hand and the daily routine of media use in the context of family, community and nation on the other.<sup>(42)</sup>

The central point of this framework is the view of "the popular" as the space in which the direction of communication processes is visible. Culture, in this sense, is understood as social mediation between communication processes and "the popular". Mediated-reception fosters circulation of meanings, the adaptation of "the popular" to the media, and people's recognition of their identities in media discourses.

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<sup>42</sup> Communication Research Trends, 1977, 7.

My exploration of sources of youth identity is rooted in an analysis of the symbolic and material mediators that define and orientate youth cultural experience. Material mediators are specific instances in which views and ways of living and interpretation of other fields of existence are generated and materialized. Symbolic mediators are those elements mediating a group's ways of reading and memory, its universe of relations and values (Martín-Barbero 1982; Martínez 83:34-35).