Individualism and mass communication in the context of globalization

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Abstract

The subject of our research is the existing relation between individualism, as ideology, and mass communication in the context of globalization and social communication. If we can talk today about a second individualist revolution, whose main characteristic is a process of personalization, individualism has a complex and contradictory effect on mass communication. The values of individualism seem to dominate the content of the messages transmitted through mass media. In the measure in which we can talk about a humanist dimension of individualism, this can be seen as beneficial, leading to the affirmation and the development of human personality. However, exaggerated hedonism and narcissism, being central values of the new individualism as well, lead to the weakening and impoverishment of human personality, and to the globalization of nothing.

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1. Introduction

The issue of individualism seems to occupy, in the last decades, an important place in the philosophic and social science debates. It is the expression of the place and role that individualism plays, as ideology, in contemporary society. We witness, as Gilles Lipovetsky said, at the “second individualist revolution” (Lipovetsky, 1983). The expansion of individualism is linked to a multitude of factors, such as: globalization, the imposition of the consumer society, mentality changes produced, the collapse of communist totalitarianism, etc. On the other hand, we witness an explosive development of mass communication, both in what concerns the technical means of communication,
and the media’s impact on both the individual and society. This paper will try, in the following lines, to approach the relation between individualism, as ideology, and mass communication in the context of the process of globalization. Mass communication has gone through the process of globalization as well. Because of this, the values of individualism became widespread and even imposed worldwide. However, the values of contemporary individualism are heterogeneous. We could even talk about individualisms, instead of individualism, which can lead to the contradictory effects of mass communication, whose messages are saturated with the values of individualism. Sometimes these effects can be beneficial for the receiver of the messages, other times, they can have negative consequences on his/her personal life but also for the development of social life in general.

2. Defining elements of individualism

Individualism, as ideology, imposed itself even from the beginning of the modern era, becoming in good measure, a foundation of economic, political and moral thinking. Classic economists (such as Adam Smith, for example), considered that the full affirmation of the individual and his interests in the economic life, with a reduced involvement of the state, with as few limitations as possible, assures progress, the welfare of both the individual and the collective. Theories on democracy from the same epoch, put the individual at the center in political life as well. This individualism, which we might call classic individualism, was characterized by Macpherson as “possessive individualism” and, in this perspective, “society is reduced at a group of free and equal individuals, tied to one another through the fact that they own their capacities and what the exertion of these capacities permitted them to achieve” (Macpherson, 2004).

We believe that for a better understanding of the characteristics of contemporary individualism it is necessary to remember a famous argument which took place in the second half of the 19th century with Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim in leading roles.

Herbert Spencer, an adept of social Darwinism, but who considered himself a follower of the conception of classic English economists, sees individualism near the idea of social egoism. He considers that egoism is the starting point of humanity, altruism being nothing more than a recent acquisition (Spencer.). Evidently, this conception contributed to the bad image that individualism got at a commonsensical level. As François de Singly wrote: “he is perceived as the cause for the retreat upon the self, of egoism, indifference towards the other, of incivility” (Singly, 2005).

However, the opposition between individualism and altruism is in fact a false opposition, a confusion between egoism and individualism. As Karl Popper argued, it is about a willful confusion, which appears starting with antiquity and which is linked to the defense of a collectivist vision of society (Popper, 2000). Émile Durkheim is one of the firsts who rightfully criticizes Spencer’s ideas, showing that we are dealing with altruism and egoism in any and all society. More than that, contrary to Spencer’s ideas, egoism seems to be more noticeable in modern society than in primitive ones. In what concerns Durkheim, we are dealing with a “paradoxical individualism” (Jankélévitch, 1987). In an article, he resumes this paradox as: to be an individualist but saying that the individual is a product of society. His sociological theory, as his method are evidently holistic. He rejects utilitarianism and Smith’s idea of the “invisible hand”. This type of individualism is refused on the basis of being a wrong theory on the genesis of society, as an ideology which generates moral anarchy and threatens social harmony. But, in the same time, it reclaims another type of individualism, “that of Kant and Rousseau, that of spiritualists, that which the Declaration of Human Rights tried, more or less fortunate, to translate into propositions, that which is taught currently in our schools and which became the basis of our moral catechism” (Durkheim, 1987). Individualism, thus understood is the “glorification not of the ego but of the individual in general. It relies not on egoism but on the sympathy for everything that is human, a mercy for all pains, for all human misery, a more ardent need to combat and sweeten them, a stronger thirst for justice” (idem).

Another specification must be made about the concept of individualism, that it in fact signifies a very diverse reality. There were numerous types and forms of individualism identified. Georg Simmel, for example, made the distinction between “latin individualism” and “Germanic individualism” (Simmel, ….). In his famous work of introduction to this subject, Steven Lukes made a reference to some other types, such as: political, ethical, economic, religious, epistemological, methodological individualism (Lukes, 2006). Just as well, Pierre Birnbaum and Jean Leca, in the presentation of their book on individualism, talk about utilitarian, romantic, market, legislative, ethical,
sociological, and an epistemological individualism (Birnbaum&Leca, 1991). For the purpose of our paper, however, we believe that we can start from a very broad definition of individualism, considering it “an ideology which favors the individual and neglects or subordinates social totality” (Dumont, 1983).

To characterize contemporary individualism, we believe that we can draw upon a multitude of points of view. One of them belongs to Gilles Lipovetsky. He argued that what is characteristic for contemporary individualism is the “process of personalization”. This personalization supposes, at the level of society, the minimum of constraints possible for the individual, and at the same time, assuring the maximum of possible choices, a minimum of coercion and a maximum of understanding. Personalization “promotes and incarnates a fundamental value, that of personal realization, of the respect of subjective singularity, whatever the forms of control and homogenization” (Lipovetsky, 1983). This “total” individualism of the second individualist revolution is “hedonistic and psychological, making intimate accomplishment the main purpose of existence” (idem).

Such a way of looking at individualism excludes the possible opposition, practiced in many cases, most often in at a commonsensical level, between individualism and humanism. “With the model of an emancipated individual, individualism is a humanism, designing an ideal world in which every human being can flourish and become itself” (Singly, 2005). This understanding of individualism is not, however, a product of contemporary thinking. Durkheim, for example, an anti-individualist in his sociological theory, accepts individualism when it is about “the glorification, not of ego but of the individual in general” (Durkheim, 1987).

This vision however, must not make us lose sight of the negative effects which individualism can generate. Let us remember Fitoussi and Rosanvallon’s concepts of “positive individualism” and “negative individualism”. They argued that modern individualism is at the same time “a vector of individual emancipation, developing their autonomy and making them subjects carrying rights and an insecurity factor, making each individual responsible for his/her future, constraining him or her to give a meaning to their lives which nothing from the outside can organize”(Fitoussi&Rosanvallon, 1999). We are talking in this case about an “individualization - emancipation which is doubled by and individualization – weakening” (idem).

3. Globalization, individualism and mass communication

Globalization represents a “process of extension in time and space of social relations and the accentuation of dependencies, networks and interactions between contexts, localities and regions distanced in the planetary social space” (Vlasceanu, 2011). It is a complex, multidimensional process. We can talk, on the one hand, about local transformations produced by factors with global action, and, on the other hand, about global transformation produced by evolution is local spaces. Globalization is, at the same time political, economic, social and cultural. Social actors involved in this process are of a great variety: settlements, regions, national states, organizations, groups or persons. We can distinguish, as well between the objective aspects of the process, meaning the global extension of economic, social, political, or cultural interdependencies and the subjective aspects, the awareness of the global flows and interdependencies. In essence, globalization means a transformation of the world in the direction of unicity, of creating a “sole sociocultural space”. The metaphor used since 1962 by Marshall McLuhan, of “global village” is particularly expressive in this sense.

The efforts of operationalizing the concept led to establishing a set of complementary transformations which globalization induces in the contemporary world:

a. A change in the way of understanding space and time. Space is contracted, because of the unprecedented development of means of transportation and communication, while time is diluted, as we live, in short intervals even more diverse experiences.

b. The multiplication of cognitive and cultural flows. The apparition and the development of mass media, print, telephone, cinematography, radio, television, internet, make possible the faster transmittance of larger amounts of information, from every part of the world to any part of the world.

c. The intensification and extension of interactions and interdependencies.

d. The affirmation of globality or of the consciousness of global flows. The term of globality, proposed by Ronald Robertson, highlights this subjective aspect of globalization.
With globalization, a whole series of major problems confronting society, some old, some new, become global and more acute. Poverty, economic inequality, become a problem of the world, not of a state or another. The food crisis, the raw material crisis, environmental problems, but also criminality, human trafficking, terrorism, demand today a global resolve. On the other hand, globalization as process, or some aspects of it at least (economic, political, cultural), has its adversaries. An “anti-globalization” movement is today, evidently, global.

Ritzer argues that the theories which deal with the process of globalization can be divided in three categories: economic theories, political theories and cultural theories. They reflect three major dimensions of the process, but it must be said that they cannot be fully separated. In what concerns the subject of this paper we believe that cultural globalization is of particular interest. On this aspect of globalization there are three major positions: cultural differentialism, cultural convergence and cultural hybridization. Cultural differentialism, described most eloquently by Samuel Huntington’s as famous as it is controversial book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, considers that there are durable differences between cultures and that these cultures are not affected in their essence by globalization, remaining thus in permanent conflict. Theories of cultural convergence consider that globalization leads to global cultural uniformity, as cultures change under the influence of dominant societies and groups. It focuses on a form of “cultural imperialism”. The adepts of cultural hybridization believe that there is a mixture of cultures, provoked by globalization, and that the integration of global and local leads to the apparition of hybrid-cultures, which cannot be reduced to neither global cultural, nor local culture. Robertson launched a key concept for the idea of cultural hybridization: glocalization. Glocalization is defined as “the intertwining of global and local, with unique effects in different geographical areas” (apud Ritzer, 2010). Glocalization is different, even opposed to, globalization (from grow), meaning the “imperialist ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, etc. Their desire, if not their need, to impose themselves in different geographical areas” (idem). These significant aspects of globalization are, in Ritzer’s opinion, capitalism, mcdonaldization and Americanization.

In our opinion, individualist ideology and globalization can be, under certain aspects, congruent, and under other aspects contradictory. Individualism can be considered as a value support of individualization, but, on the other hand, it can fundament some orientations of the anti-globalization movement as well. It is clear that globalizations in contemporary society is based in fact on the values of capitalism from an economic point of view and on democracy from a political point of view. Both capitalism and democracy have an individualist ideology at their foundation. This does not necessarily mean, however, that it should be considered a justification of the excesses and the abuses of globalization. Many times, these can be taken as forms of imperialism, of the imposing and political and economic expansion of superpowers, such as the United States. More than that, trying to impose capitalism, democracy and American cultural values have as purpose the profit of major American corporations and the political dominance of the U.S. Individualism becomes, in this case, a pretext and a support for the instauration of an American dominance on the entire world. It is all the more possible considering that after the collapse of communism, the United States remained the only superpower. We are talking here about individualism as a support of American globalization.

The glocalization process, which represents a way of mitigating the excesses of globalization is based on an individualist ideology as well. Glocalization refers to the principles of defending individual and collective identities, the specific of social identities, upholding human rights, especially the right to difference and mutual respect.

The anti-globalization movement can also claim to be based, in some cases, on an individualist ideology. It must be mentioned that anti-globalism is not a homogenous movement, with a unique ideology, even though there is a common purpose for all these different manifestations against globalization. Sometimes, the anti-globalization movements act in the name of collectivist ideologies. Leftist, Marxist or communist movements are a good example in this aspect. Individualism is denied in its essence, even though, at the surface it is a movement against capitalism or Americanism. It is the same situation in the case of militant Islamism, even in its fanatical forms, which starts from a collectivist ideology as well. Just as Soviet Russia tried, during the Cold War to impose an area of domination, through the pretext of the “export of revolution” (the help given to oppressed nations worldwide), militant Islamism tries the same thing through “jihad”. To impose its domination in a larger, ever-growing area. This does not exclude however the existence of anti-globalization movements, in fact anti-grobalization, which fight against the excesses and the abuses of globalization starting from individualist ideologies, which are not necessarily anti-capitalism, demanding instead the respect of the right to identity, difference, respect of minorities, etc.
Looking from the perspective of the support that globalization assures to individualism, it must be said that through globalization, the values of individualism tend to become universal. However, it must not be forgot that with universalization, the excesses which lead to the impoverishment of individualism are also becoming universal. Excessive consumerism, the stimulation of needs, replacing authentic values with pseudo-values, mcdonaldization, are also directions of globalization which impoverish individualism, mitigating its humanist character.

The globalization process is strongly linked to the profound modifications which social communication has went through in the last century, especially mass communication, which can be considered one of the most important forms of social communication (Balle, 1997). There is a vast amount of concrete research done on the topic of mass communication, theories were elaborated, and its positive and/or negative effects on the individual and society were underlined. It is not the place to review the most significant of these researches carried. Still, we must point that the apparition and the explosive development of the internet in the last decades pose new problems to researchers in this field. Some of them consider that we are dealing with a new form of social communication. Manuel Castells, for example, introduces the concept of mass self-communication, for characterizing internet based communications, arguing that: “.It is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience, as in the posting of a video on YouTube, a blog with RSS links to a number of web sources, or a message to a massive e-mail list. At the same time, it is self-communication because the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from the World Wide Web and electronic communication is self-selected” (Castells, 2009).

The globalization of mass communication is mainly a phenomena of the 20th century, but its roots are in the 19th century, because “during the 19th century the information and communication flows at a global scale have become a constant and persistent trait of social life” (Thompson).

Large media companies, which dominate the process of globalization and mass communication, belong to the Western World (North American, Western Europe, Australia, and Japan). This is reflected in the characteristics of the media products transmitted. In other words, we can talk about a cultural imperialism, and the values transmitted explicitly or implicitly in this process are those that are dominant in the Western World, thus, the values of individualism. More than that, hedonism, the consumerism of the new individualism, well rounded in the economically developed states are, in fact, imposed on the world. It is true that we must consider as well the way in which these messages transmitted through the globalized media are appropriated in different parts of the world. This means that the meaning that diverse individuals and groups, with certain ethnic, religious, or cultural identities, give to the received messages can be different. It is the already presented process of glocalization, meaning the “intertwining of global and local with unique results in different geographical areas” (Ritzer, 2010). This leads John B. Thompson to talk, in connection with the process of globalization of mass communication, about the appearance of a new, defining axis: “the axis of globalized broadcasts and localized appropriations” (Thompson).

4. Conclusions

Firstly, the globalization process, including globalized mass communication spread, in general, the values of an individualist ideology.

Secondly, the values of individualism linked to democratization, market economy, human rights, etc. transmitted through the globalized mass media, determined the democratic development of some countries or parts of the world. We believe, for example, that the collapse of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe was caused by the spread of these values in those specific countries.

Thirdly, imposing, sometimes aggressively, the values of individualism through globalized mass communication can generate anti-globalization movement, which, from the point of view of adopted values, are situated in some cases against individualism. The solution can be the achievement of an equilibrium between globalized broadcasting and a local appropriation, or, in other words, of a real glocalization (Ritzer, 2010).

Fourthly, messages impregnated with the values of individualism transmitted through the globalized mass media can, on one hand, respond to the hedonistic, narcissistic demands of the new individualism, developing and strengthening them, and, on the other hand, contribute to democratization, better enforcement of human rights, protection of the environment, the development of human personality. From this perspective, the globalization of
individualist values is beneficial for the individual and the society. It is an enactment of the humanist dimension of individualism. In the first case there is the danger of dealing with a “globalization of nothing”, nothing being “a social form conceived and concentrated at a central level, devoid of any significant content” (Ritzer, 2010), diffused at a global scale. This does not mean that all messages which correspond to hedonistic needs, to play, to entertainment should be eliminated. The danger appears when they become exclusive or dominant. It is then, that the consumer of mass media messages transforms himself into a “homo videns”, a “video-child”, which forms a “culture of inculture”, in a process of communication in which “emptiness communicates emptiness” (Sartori, 2005).

Fifthly, the apparition and explosive development of the internet, the new form of mass communication, which has a series of new characteristics, radically different from other communication media, offers multiple possibilities and at a bigger scale in both dimensions of individualistic requests. The internet can respond both to hedonistic needs, as well to self-formation needs. We consider important in this sense the existence of an Internet consumer culture and of media in general, which can be formed through education.

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